

GIRL FISHING

The edge of wings. A hare stares up: falcon swerving,
turning inverse in its round, brown eye. Heartbeat
into heartbeat: how the bodies clash to mingle blood. The open
beak, the tearing neck. The talon, and the ear. A girl, in yellow,
singing to her stick. The single filament looped through
the pin-sized hole: the iron hook, brand-new,
a cursive question mark for what she questions
from the creek. Tadpoles squirming through the hollowed
body of the sunken stump. The girl sings, "Froggy,
froggy." "Who," an owl replies, awakened by the crack
of bone on bone, of metal sinking into water,

curve in curve, in center falling, and at its borders,
echoing in space, what the movement outward is: tremulous wings
opening from the point of entry of a speck of leaf, the rims
of the nearly microscopic waves on which the inlaid wings
of the skimming dragonfly hum. The wind is everywhere:
it turns a loose plank in the shed to tap and turn
to tap the wall again, unknowing game of peek-a-boo. It holds

the water as it dies, carries it into itself to hold as cloud, to grieve
as rain. Mostly water, surely we are reborn,
all of us. The ghosts we are is no cliché: we bathe
in them, we cook with them, innumerable ancestors
carry themselves down the contours of
our faces. What is in the water, friend, for you? A shiny toy?
A miracle of speed to carry to your mother in a Mason jar?
Surely, you are thinking now of other things: the mystery of birds,
or worms. The way in which the flesh beneath your knees
is adhering to the rock.

ENGLISH-PHILOSOPHY BUILDING, IOWA CITY

*"The stifled musk of wood beneath linoleum
in the tall listening stairwells of certain
buildings stays..."*

"Iowa City," Denis Johnson

Place means nothing, being arbitrary. A stairwell in Iowa shares the dank of the black, black-lit spiral ramp that curls around the central tank in Boston's aquarium. Both glow a selective dusk; concerning matters of concentration and observation, harsh fluorescence is distracting. Inside that tube, men in black rubber suits descend with nets of ragged meat to feed the sharks; each is out of place. At home, the feeder spreads his hand before his mirror, practicing the monologue that will thread him through this year at his odd job:

*Iz, laughter huddles on Peaks Island, by a brick grill, waiting.
Can't you hear us? Hangover soaked, fuzzy-tongued blowers
cooling a half-mile mirror with phantoms of our breaths. Thirty-two Augusts.
Ziploc bags of soggy pizza between the slick bananas
of our thighs. Blackbirds and frogs burping, we bother few fish
between the warnings of our voices. Scales scraped are only notes
toward stories we'll lug home. Eagerly, we wade back to those good-byes:
stifled tears,
fists pounding the walls cornering a keg. Henry in the VA hallway,
flirting with the nurses between twitches. Ed slapping the Globe against a
radio's burr,
his son so smart before the street-queers connived him into thin arms,
pale red eyes.
Carl mumbling to a scrawny fisherman in chapel, his scarlet fingers throbbing
beneath the frayed connection of their rings. I'll be the next to go, Iz.
Hacking echoes on the far shore. Lean safe to me:
this might be the earth, fetching across water for our sorrow,
deer crawling through breakers for food on nearby islands. Do you remember
me? Do you remember?*

The gliding fish live in mirror-bordered cages,
unlike their deeps, might be aware in some boneless,
ancient way that they aren't free, but this is why some loping whale
or lizard slithered onto moist land anyway, above
the rippling ceilings of its sky, where the blue sun
spun its thousand eyes and swam away. Instinct
and intelligence mean nothing to the sun, having neither.
But Iowans

are fascinated by the soil, bragging of the riches
glaciers left beneath their icy bellies. Centimeter-thin slabs

of algae netting, worms and something that survives
as a tangled film of turquoise color, these are the remnants
of the Devonian. Segmented pods of cement gray rock
that broken open reveal the mineralized remains of free-standing
coral, *Hexagonaria percarinata*, that when polished
are known as the Petoskey stone, found also in the Gravel Point Formation,
named for the Ottawa Indian chief Pet-O-Sega, and now
the state rock of Michigan.

To an Easterner

who knows the angriest sea pounding great minerals
into sand, knows spring is snow on hedges of forsythia,
surprise!—these claims are quaint.
The transient walking the bridge over the brown river and back out
are promised nothing but have called ahead to friends along the far shore and echo
faintly as they go. Summer begins to chill, the frost
shakes all the trees, letting free great schools of construction-paper
fish, to sail, commingle, gambol, dive, dart and fall, skittering
in lonely whirlpools over streets of irregular red brick
seeping out of pale-blue and crumbling black-top. These thick slabs
of black stone on all sides as I trudge up to the third floor—
where my hands had aimed and captured what they hunted—
these stones smell of the sea.

PREPARING THE GROUNDS

I will show you three ways to see the morning. From up above,
inside, peer out from the screen, webbed at its edges
with the dust of storms, unlucky, desiccated bugs...
see the sun begin to burn the haze from summer dark.
From the middle of the room (bare boards, oval rugs,
a couch, some easy chairs and stacks of boring magazines)
beyond a faint gray shadow, if you stare a little without focusing,
not quite growing cross-eyed, the lake seems like a city

seen in a droplet of quicksilver (which is the polite name
of mercury, the poison in thermometers). The dock, the raft,
the dock, around it goes, around the far edge of the water
and around, you might just sit inside a tire swing and hang
your head back, push yourself in circles with one foot
on the bared roots: but there is no tree to block what can be seen,
or slow your own velocity. Water rippled black, gold, blue. Steep hills
of piney woods through yards of beached sailboats, motorboats,

lawnmowers, nylon folding chairs and then the bare, tan yard
of sand that the lake laps at. Amber shallows sloping
into slimy dark. Think of that when someone shakes
the thin glass tube and shoves it underneath your tongue, and tells you
"Bite down on this but not too hard." There is an empty city there
which will kill me should I swallow. So. So go up to the screen, very
close, but not too close: not only wire boxes of outside
and strings of black, but metal, almost red because of oxygen

and rust, woven like a burlap sack. Now the wires press on the wires
and curve around each other and are held in place by how they touch,
and by the tautness of the frame holding them flat. You hardly think
about the earth when you are this close to a door. It's six o'clock. All day,
with people talking, coming, going, smoking, drinking,
talking, singing, sleeping, eating, there's not one minute's peace
to stand up at the sill and press your nose into the mesh. It's good
to get up early, since you cannot stay awake as late as everybody

wants to. Although the water makes you drowsy, or the drying
does. The big black quiet and the million stars that can't be seen
at home. Ducks. Today, the guests will change. My grandma
on my mother's side, the others on the other side. I mix the old ones up,
everyone is old. I can't tell one from the other as they fan out
from my hands, the grands are certain, blurred off into greats. I make
the old men nervous. Old ladies praise my eyelashes and coo. They tell me
who to hate and trust and not to trust and how to die

outside of Jesus is my mother's only wish for me: to burn. I take things in my stride. I am all bone and blond and cannot see how things will fall. My body changed. My voice grew vague and thick, suspicious in uncertainty, and every question asked of me darkened into question whose answer I did not know and would not be told. I wish, I think, I were a seagull that swallowed Alka-Seltzer, exploded with my wingspan defying sea. I wish that I had hunched down near the horseshoes, waited for rain to shrink and mingle me

with snows of dandelion down, crawled onto jeweled segmented backs of dragonflies and water skied into the marsh. Slow down. Slow. I see this morning clearly, and I think I never saw this clear again. The coffee maker was white Corningware, with blue spots suggesting flowers. The strong black plastic handle and the shining iron rim. The plug, detachable, Vulcanized and black, on one end with a plug like, not a bell, but some Vaudevillian lady's bloomers starched out stiff

and sturdy on its hems. The shiny silver stump-legs in their clogs. And at the other end, the beetle back with two holes for the prongs. You slide it in, sometimes it sparks, sometimes the plain and mirrored surface of the drum stands too close to a puddle and the toaster smokes. It is a question, then, of which action do you take—you fill it first with water (best not drunk unless it's boiled), you spoon the coffee, then, into the tub while it is lying on the counter. Put cracked eggshells in,

six spoonfuls of sugar (I don't know at this moment the uncanny origins of caramel: I'm still inventing things). If you put the thin, stiff tube into the water first, it tilts. If you put the tub onto the metal tube, and try to put it in you miss the socket for it way down at the bottom, or the tube falls out, or worse, grains of the coffee fall into the water, already there's a million jots of black in concentric circles on the counter. You have to try to hold the tub by pinching

in the middle where the tube juts up. You have to lower, very slowly down, the whole thing into the coffee-maker and negotiate the hole. You must make sure that the tub fits snug inside it. You have to slide the top on, like a helmet with its spun glass bun that blooms with java when the whole contraption's plugged in to the wall. The water heats, and rushes upward, sprays the fine grounds—the sound of bare feet through the crumbs of last night's dinner. You must remember remembering

the last sort of way of seeing as the coffee gurgles, percolates, and sighs: you must go, then, beyond the wires, press your eyes so close that they then disappear. This way, there is no screen at all. A haze

of doorframe, doorframe, ledge leading off to darkness
 in the hedges, then, it's day—birds and motorboats,
 hibachis sizzling meat and greasy smoke, too many things
 in motion, sounds cacophonous, discordant, the commotion: day.

MATHEMATICS

I am not a number, but my brother is. He's one.
 Shouting integers into his fists when I come in
 from Student Council, shaking off red tape. The air:
 dark ash and apple. I turn *The Simpsons* down
 and touch his cheek: he still feels warm. He says my name:
 Eddy. Claps his hands (never in odd increments,
 only in evens). Only Eric asks me how he's doing,
 as if my twin were something changing
 like we are: humming with hormones at our desks,

hard-ons perpetually printed with the Boris Karloff
 patterns of our zippers. My brother is like Saturday,
 but shorter: pleasant, uneventful, fretful
 as any child would be eternally at leisure. I call
 from the refrigerator, "Want some chicken,
 Rain Man?" but Brian cannot answer. Ingrid
 drags up from the basement, carrying a basket full
 of dusty paper flowers. "Wreaths. The Christmas Craft-show."
 I watch her puff up, hovering the basket down

at Brian's feet, cheerful in her love for him,
 and then turns sullenly away, into a woman
 without tenderness to spare. A shadow
 that will pass over her face a moment, then be gone:
 she would fix him, like a motor, stands before
 the static of his person, a reflection of herself.
 She wears him in her eyes, a doll she should have
 buried, but gave away instead. Last summer,
 I went with Eric on a Greyhound bus to Maine,

to his father's place, Augusta, his room-mate's
 sailboat like a fin, and each of us a scale reflecting sunlight
 from our sides like smashing diamonds—and saw
 my mother older and my father drawn on my return,
 the fences graying, chicken wire rolling from the corners
 where the staples rusted through. Brian bit his thumbs,
 told me what seconds I'd been gone. "Take your filthy
 sneakers off the table," my sister says, plucking at the cracked
 petals of a pinecone in shellac. I fold a wing onto my plate,

and slide it in: I watch the greases crackling, turning
 slowly in the microwave. Brian shuffles through the kitchen,
 stares out through the wall like a dog catching the smell

of squirrel on the wind. I tug at Ingrid's sleeve,
but she will not come. I put my jacket on, help Brian
into his. When I was seven, I told him a secret
no one else will ever know: lying in our bunks, him

multiplying sheep for me: 2. 4. 8. The shadow of his hand
dragging on the floor below, his fingers hooking through
blue loops of carpet in the attacking glow that *Mighty Mouse*,
The Nite-Lite, gave. Our different bodies took years
to pull apart in sleep. I tried to navigate the valley
where his monoliths of numerals reverberated
in an empty air, towering above us, meeting him,
crawling at each other (Zax) through a tunnel of sixes
rocking like commas in our sleep, foot-long digits
rising to me in a sweet song (if a monotone is sweet:
his voice a flute piping mathematics I would go mad

to understand.) Eric draws pictures of grizzly bears
with huge erections for me, but he is moving soon.
I'm pissed. He knows the zero of his absence
will teach me who to be. On Thursday night,
Mom's painting class. Dad reads his papers while Ingrid
sets the table. I flip tater-tots and fish-sticks
while Brian stares up at the moon
through linen curtains, singing to himself. Today,
today is Wednesday. We are all due in. The two of us

barely off the back-steps before a wind
shakes every tree, two unseen arms scooping
up under the branches, bringing branches
back up with them, then dropping
everything at once. Red and yellow leaves
brighten the October air, then suddenly: it's still.
I tug at Brian's sleeve, to continue, but he
is finished with his walk.
"2065," he says to me. "What's that, hoss?"
"2086."

FLAT-TOP

Sixteen years. Working. August day when yellow dust was in the air, wanting at my eyes—free in sweat and sweating to be man
I walked past houses, the sites of youthful beatings: swinging up to bloody Tony's nose as lesser bullies held me back. I smoldered with the picked-on schoolboy's frenzy. I was small and fat, did not fight fair. My teeth wore flat against the cheek and knuckle of every corner's black-eyed king. Better to lose and leave prickly fear behind: my mouth, bloodied chubby, wanted

honey from their lips. The first meat-room paycheck brought me to the barber, my own ten-dollar bill inside my pocket, like a key, my family hanging at my temples like a bowl of fine brown thread. Old hat. Leather boys huddled together, conferring street secrets under basketball hoops, backboards. The few wire-armed chairs, racks of magazines: *Runner's Worlds*. *Sports Illustrateds*. *Fishings*. The oasis of a dog-eared *Rolling Stone* that I had read, cover to cover, seven months before. If my body could not be new again,

then the outside world must change. I sat afraid next to an old man (old?) his age seemed more a quality of anger—ancient, nearly bald, time and money burning holes somewhere and in my way. Back then, the Boss was not quite God, or sex: the last frontier beyond the high and sparkling cataracts of beer and clouds of marijuana to be scaled. I would never try those things. I lied. I bowed my head, slumped into my green chair, and glanced, embarrassed, at my face and greening tooth: I smiled above the scissors, lotion, combs, and closed

my eyes. He talked to me of rubber balls, animals, the neighborhoods of tools I knew I had to enter. Then he said, "You in the Army?" I shook my head. A clump of me fell to the floor. I mumbled something of the heat, his callused fingers maneuvering the ridges of my scalp, shorting the wiring of my lungs. "You got a girlfriend?" I froze. That question! I couldn't speak, astounded by that particular affront. "Not yet," I said, attempting to sound hopeful. "Well, when you get one"—confronting me

to walk a little closer to the light—"Rub this in her snatch"—he twisted his palm flat across the contours of my head—"She'll love it." I couldn't breathe. My only head! I never would be free of insult, interrogation, or the idiotic suggestions of my elders. I heard the whirring fans, the buzzing shears,

felt sweat curling around the strange and useful testicles, my only confidants. All these others—did I have them fooled? Was I pretender to their houses, families, dogs? Even now, I hurt a little for the punch

on the shoulder, fantasias on the gasps of pussies, secrets of stoned cowboys.

THE NIGHTWATCHMEN

I.

The night bell rings. Dark bodies creep out from the walls, shadows on old stock. A foot of snow holds back their stepping toward the white graves of ice-skinned cars. I can see them through the neon crack of door that I've nudged open with my book. I feel the mats beneath my body slide upon a smell of motor-oil and ketchup, heard a mouse-

sized plastic vessel burst. My nose, tickled by the greasy bag (it still reeks of salted fried potatoes): but I cannot bend my arms in close enough to push the thing away. The snow is blue, is blue before it's snow. I think, but feel the night winds coloring each flake before it fuses them into one bumpy skin of indigo. The pink sky flings a thousand black flakes from the indistinct

mire of itself, and the sharp wind squeaks, the lanterns of the traffic lights rocking on their wires. A door scrapes open. Then, that hell of tambourines that is my father's pocket rattles closer to the car. I hate the sound of human voices guffawing by the gate as he trades pleasantries with the guard he replaces as my fingers burn, as spots of ice form on the balls of my toes inside my sneakers. Under newspapers,

behind the ratty seats, I would be flat, immobile, wedded to the ink.

II.

Strips of bunting litter the floor. My mother, in a pink robe, lifts her cigarette and points it at the barren tree. Twelve boxes, some bigger than me, surround the old black and white television we lugged into the living room as she sewed. Her hazel eyes are furious, dams on rivers that have not yet formed within the Arctic circle, but which men have penciled

into maps for centuries. John Lennon's shot: a week before, *Charles Rocket hunted for the Beatle and his Yoko* (Double Fantasy) for the doomed, forgotten season of *Saturday Night Live*. (When he was 56 years old, Charles Rocket spoke to his wife, went out into the yard of his farmhouse in Connecticut, and slit his throat. A mortal wound.) Weekdays

never end. Charlie, dribbling snot, runs up to me each day,

blank slate, and asks me where I've been: I say, "She's dead. The old lady. Took a month to go," and he runs giggling away, sniffing apologies down the same hall where Maureen lifted her puckish face, fresh from the bubbler, to mine, smiled, and blew a mouthful of water over me. Outside, the neighbor's yard is black, but only

where the snow has come a little closer to the grass and mingled in. Bobbin and needle leap, clatter, my mother focused into stitching pushes along a scarlet banner, glued with letters of green felt and silver glitter. "It won't be the same this year," she says, and I remember now my prayer. I gave my soul to nothing, and got nothing back.

III.

Furnaces blur and rumble, and a hot wind howls. An enormous block of painted iron rattles to witness as I pass, then suddenly: silence, no sound but mine, footsteps through oil and sawdust on concrete, whistle of one leg in corduroy against another: I dream a naked man on burning rocks in tropic climes, and a woman (but if I concentrate, a man) that might be me beneath him make a silent exercise of lust where it is temperate. Here: just Hell and cold worse than any punishment, deep in my bones.

Crates of chain on beveled wheels shine in foot-sized figure-eights. Far off, beneath a spiral staircase, a sooty tube sprays out an orange flame. My father's punch-clock, canteen with tiny lock, slung around my neck. Three sentry points to go: cafeteria: orange tables crouch in the hum and shadow of four snack machines—a grimy door beneath green glass pressing diamonds of black wire where someone sharpens things—and the locker room, three floors below, where I know

some lockers, left unlocked, house the Christmas *Playboy*, almost new, still glossy underneath work gloves and cans of shaving cream. I take my glasses off, approach the sink (cement and pumice basin surrounding a pillar of like stone), jab at the nozzle, (a shining steel cylinder with a spring inside) with my palm, and lean down, squinting at the gritty soap sprinkled underneath the cracked dispenser, and a bar, streaked black, rougher than sandpaper, or a grown man's clumsy kiss.

THE SLIDE

*On Olam, each citizen is Munch-made, jawless faces
gaping at its seven moons...but everyone has died,
except for Olwe, crawling through his tube
beneath the raining wings of ice, the poisoned air
and spirits of his people shrieking through ghost towns
seven centuries away from the one-story ranch
with two acres behind: three green apple trees,*

*their branches barely kindling, the swing and sandbox
made from diesel wheels, the muddy creek
where crawdads pinch at dragonflies
dying in the tangling reeds. A concrete block
where a tool-shed used to sit. Summers here
are hot, the winters deep, deeper than the lengths
of children's bodies, and the wind is harsh*

*in the fields beyond a barricade of yellowed grass,
black-eyed susans nodding in goldenrod at crumpled wings
of aluminum that were its walls twitching in the light.
On Olam, salt is forming on the eyelids of the babysnatch.
Here, at home, our eyes are bottomless. Inside an eyedropper,
we hold clear water to the sun to see that there is
nothing there, although the creek runs brown. A little*

*bit of it is clear. We turn inside, where rectangles
of balsam in our third dimension is a fragile box,
with a flat-lock, thimble-shaped, that drops over
an half-oval loop of wire. Inside, a microscope, electric,
compartments crammed with *Band-Aid* sized rectangles of blue-
green glass, square stacks so thin that globes
of it would float on water. *I see the seven circles**

*on the roiling sea of nitrogen, the caryatids of lovers
transfixed in the needle-heaps of shattered flocks,
hear the chiming of the bubbles blown from mouths
of the armored, ravenous rays. When I leave home,
it is always to the water. With hooked thumbs, she opens
the envelope, blows the tissue paper pages over the table.*

They fit neatly over the thin of glass that press

the droplet we pinch down onto the sharp-edged slide.
She swings the S-shaped clamps that brace our experiment,
and flips the steel, tear-shaped switch. The contraption
hums. Lenore squints first, to focus lenses. I watch her,
kneeling on the high-backed chair. Her straight black hair
wagging over dripping breasts. The poncho, with its hood
hidden behind her neck. In the other room, the news

is full of stomping, somber baritones. Streakers' heyday.
"Dr. Octopus" at three, "The Brady Bunch" at seven. *I itch.*
There is something missing, but I am distracted by these games.
My a'nt's face strangely like my mother's, except that I can see
her skin, the imperfections of it, actual shadows
beneath both eyes. Her voice deeper than a boy's: she is
almost like a boy, but smells better, like a man: smoke, SpeedStick,

incense, patchouli oil, and tea, I think, or apricots,
like the shop with the spiral staircase and the wicker shelves
of candles, pine-cone sticks, greeting cards and Buddhas. The back
room is always better: you enter through a wall of wind-chime beads,
a cataract of blonde wood flutes. Inside,
I am transformed: a skeleton of neon-violet stripes
darting among the lava-lamp aquariums. Enormous books

of Day-Glo poster, flat in metal frames that clack
as you flip through, are bolted to the walls. A muscled forearm
reaching from a porcelain bowl to tug the dangling chain. Zap
pa. A globe of bright red lightning that will leap
to read your palms. Toothbrush-bristle corals
pulsing like The Different Colored Horse: when you blow,
the filaments will part to hide the nurse-fish of your breath.

My a'nt is better than the boys I know. My little brother,
for instance. Punching me, and punching, but I win
because I bite. Beyond her forehead, walls diffuse, squares
of gold and green: drowsy, shifting clouds of summer distance.
Knob-edged plates on which Jesus is baked, held to the plaster
with cast iron hooks. I know this. I have studied how things fall
to earth to break. The tube, green vinyl wrapped around a six-foot

spring: mouth, gullet and anus, like a lamprey, its maw
resting in the threshold of the room I sleep in
when I am here. Where the color-television is, the hide-away.
The clock. It makes me listen to it tick and tick the dark away.
Scott: his lips parted. Unconscious and angelic Eddy
Haskell fisting the silk sash of the rainbow blanket at his neck.
Nora's room is always dark when I am granted entrance:

I breathe deep. Cigarettes and that other smoke. Pinewood sanded of its stain. The B&W TV on which we summon Kung Fu. I like it, but don't understand it. Chinese people in the wild, wild west, and this hippie walking ghost towns of tumbleweed. That is Kung Fu. His teacher is Blind. Old, of course. Teases him from a throne draped in robes, calls him "Grasshopper." Holds two fists, fingers down, for Kung Fu to snatch a stone from.

Kung Fu taps one hand. The teacher turns it over, unfolding the empty lotus: pinched between his thumb and middle finger (swear) the marble shines. The show won't come on when I want it to. I do not understand this, or her bed underneath the high shelf where plaster Nefertiti gazes with disdain from painted, fish-shaped eyes. Next door, grampa slides blue pajamas under blue sheets stitched with Bebop's

arguments with dream. I creep beside them, watch their chests for breathing. When they go, I rummage the deep drawer of jewelry, sparkling in clear plastic boxes: I like the big, fake rubies best. Amethysts. Star sapphires. I am the Rhinestone Cow—
 Nora is tugging at my shirt. Her right eye against the eye-guard of our telescope that navigates the small. She rises backwards, and I scramble to her place. I prop my hands against the table

but my head won't reach. She lifts me to the lens. I try to wink, but still need practice. I can only close both eyes simultaneously, otherwise I have to bear the third dimension. I do the best I can. Three moons of hazy light slide in my sights and try to mingle, then I squint: a perfect circle, finally, surrounded by a black that has a hundred fireworks inside it exploding without sound, and then, I see them: more

clearly than I have seen anything before. Nora says that the long, segmented bamboo stalks with green in them are plants, but that whatever's left are animals with bodies I can see through, darting, snapping. I don't know if they're fish—I don't know—you know, we are animals, too, and the universe goes in forever, and out forever, and everything is big. At night, when she's around, Nora tells us—

my brother, and my sister—about out. She pulls her mouth around her teeth, hollows out her cheeks and bellows: my friend, Olwe, a millennium away. There is nothing in his hands but rainwater, burning holes straight through. He's here. He holds his hands up to the moon so that we can read its lips—but he leaves alone. Wonders what I was, did I exist. I am a little king. Curious, and foolish. I am so certain that I do.

AUSTIN DICKINSON'S COMPLAINT TO CHRIST

I.

Allow me no more Eden. I am in the snake
and from his endless gullet can report of safe and warmth,
a little dissolution. Fruit, stem and seed, the unbroken
skin conceals galaxies, his majesty a blush, for me, weary
in the ribs. Look now, look closely, who are lost, for we,

once given sight, will now be blinded by forgetfulness. I can see
the ocean through his closing fangs, the brushing of the waves against
the black stones, as if they were the paws of something
ready to attempt the air, blind with eyes
allergic to the wind and astigmatic without the clear lens of the sea.

II.

There are three stones in the pool beneath the wagon's
tire. The water burns my hands, but there, the wheel dips
into water cool and gold, one leaf lying at the bottom,
with its bottom edges up. I can see her, from the street,
beneath the plum, brushing windfall, yellow slivers,
from her shoulder as she extends a crooked finger
for the squirrel that will not come, its gray paws steady
as it gnaws the acorn. I am afraid to see her, bent there, wanting

something closer in. Each day, she writes to me from
a garden that I cannot enter, waving, as I come to her,
as if I had been leaving, all along. After a holiday
from which she has been grateful to return, and mortally
taxed by. I weary her. She has to see me seeing her.
She would have me be a guest within her voice, and she
the curator of this old earth's detritus: the miniature,
the fossilized, a hollyhock pressed in one of father's books

between his hands, he—completely riveted with thought—that she
had dropped from behind his shoulder, as he read, leaving
its preservation to the pressure of his ignoring it

with the profane crackling of her fingernail against
his ear. I have been remedied in the frozen gaze of her
behind me, where the spheres are grinding. I have heard
we are so far away from home it seems a cloud we cannot
see. My boot, stirred in the water, betrays, to me, a hole.

III.

The bogs are cooled by dark. Legless, drowsy beasts of vapor, herded
by the wind off Narragansett. I love you, Lord of Everything,
but I am bandied in your breath like oats or millet spilling
from the grist-mill's creaking wheel. I will bring to you
great chances to enhance your palisades with faith, my discarded
soul in bandages and stained through to my spirit's gut

with mortal weakness. Shepherd,
gouge me blind again.

IV.

Thrown from me, as I spilled against the boot-scrape,
sweat-spotted pages of the lady's third letter on the subject
of the third commandment in as many days. Gross novelty
and the pains of skirting hellfire with the naïf's
painted grimace tire me. And there: being licked free of a frown
by that spangled polecat with its sausage curls and collar of Parisian
diadems. She waves at me, and tumbles under sunflowers,
then instantly, is at her feet, completely still.

It is

a bumblebee, my brother—which it was,
thumb-big, plush as a cat-tail, crackling at her ear
as if it were a conscience. *Love the bee, my sister,*
I say to her, *as you would your brother. Dove*—
--I *do, I do*, she said, as she inched sideways,

and as if she were a trick of light
inside a bowl of settled rue dipped down, then swerved,
and hitching up her skirt, crawled chicken-like, hunched over,
three feet to her left, then stood, and walked—
so as not to scare the great paroled of Calvary—to the screen door,
snapped it open, then as quickly shut,

and leaning on the screen, she screamed.
In the wretched mongrel's mouth, rank with oily
marzipan and shrimp bits caked in pastry spoon-fed to him
from the table with a pewter spoon my sister shared,
on those yellow, pin-shaped fangs slippery with spittle,
I could almost see her standing, crooked, sweeping like a scythe,
and a black dot like a bad deed bouncing on the screen.

V.

I am petulant and freakish in my kit of mittens, ear-muffs,

boots. I am so long a minister of summer, raising
 praise for the green explosions of the tangible,
 railing at the spheres—defiant mountain! Oceans clumsy
 and persistent, deep as dream—I fall
 into your arms. Snug beneath it, one imagines winged things

with faces like a coil of garden hose tied with a great bow,
 and then hacked apart at every loop. But here, a cold like Hell,
 like death without the Savior's face. I bunch and pull my collar,
 how the fur teases my nose, the first sneeze of an illness
 or an allergy. I am so much more than all of this inside the flimsy skin
 of man-reared animals. I am the telescope
 to mysteries, I am the broken chalice from which the future bends
 to sip. I nudge the back door open and go home.

MARIANNE MOORE IN BROOKLYN

I.

I came, expecting something of the air. There is anger
 in the laughter of the men, astounding the liquor they consume.
 I like it here. I like their hands. I need to reach out to catch
 the finger of a baby, surprise the little fellow before he cries.

Baby, I'd be amazed by my little erections—I'd hold my breath,
 and squeeze! Still, acknowledge that these are the animal
 with gorgeous hair who have my pals inside their bodies.
 I have a cigarette. Three women whisper underneath

the table. *What's this? What's this? What's
 going on?* I can't imagine anything more beautiful than
 this cave of secrets hung with veils of perfume and muskmelon
 liqueur. Hello. The physician free to be the actor

and the poet. The bath-tub gin is bitter, down
 like fire. But there she is, Red Huzzah! It's well
 that Mina isn't here. Exquisite Po! Oh terrible, exacting mind!
 Longing draws its bath in you. The coy could learn a thing or two

from Miss Marianne. Zoos and jungles scream behind
 the segmented armor of your voice as you reach
 for a strawberry from the cut-glass bowl and ask, primly,
 "May I take the final fruit?" Think of all the sperm that flies,

frustrated, to the void. I'm glad that Mother Moore ain't here. Oh.
Dr. Williams, I presume. There she is. *(The locked draw
 of my finger through the red glass beads
 that lie within the white fan of my mother's hair against*

*my lap. My sentences and her corrections
 for me, how would I speak without her? Certainly,*

*imperfectly and free, devoid of form. In her voice,
the ease of student-hood, devoid of decision, how free*

*it is to watch my tongue, my eyes ache for looking down
into that awful place where nothing is, no sign
of where my body ends or darkness, like behind my nose—
old soul, if you are with me, this is where you stay, elusive*

*with your heavy hands tugging at my eyelashes and pulling
back my cheeks to force a smile when there is company.
How like the moon we are here, should the moon
return to its fullness, only suddenly to stop, and in the ring*

around it, promising the dry earth rainfall, absolutely vanish.)

II.

Green in winter, sky, I come to you, malnourished
and without a place to lean. I drown in ghouls,

the smelly men in summer coats who come, their pockets
bulging with their unkempt notes and birdlike flourish.

They touch me. It would be difficult to pull my hand
away without offending them. I let it pass. At night,

I dream of mockingbirds of soap who land
upon my fingers. Their voices hoot like rain, and then

they melt. Wind stirs in my hair, and then
I scatter like the petals of the dogwood.

III.

A moose is mineral and H₂O, like me. This makes
the creaking north more sporting, and less to be feared.
A girl, maybe three years old, is watching me through strings

of wet black hair. I poke my tongue—nobody's looking.
A lizard leaps within her, she waves her arms
and stamps. I have done the unexpected. She is caught.

On dock, her mouth grows tense enough to bruise
on her shut mouth, and then I wave—a gallant wave,
as if we were two soldiers greeting at the crossroads

after battle. And like the warrior she is, she waves,
while staring straight at me, as if she were counting
my irises. Forgetting and forgetting. Beginning again.

IV.

At the chalkboard, I was half asleep. I still felt
coffee making fur against my cheeks. I had to hurt
the little ruffian, it was my job.

His black eyes turned a little sideways
as I measured his knuckles:
rapidly, vertically. Then I stopped. His father drinks.

V.

If not heaven, then, a paradise—
as delightful as they are, the bears have terrible habits.
They are lucky, being bears. Rank and jolly, with bumblebees stuck
in their fur and their snouts a festivity of flies. We will hide

our souls in tin buckets, hoisted up high in the trees.
There will be windmills there, and geese. There will
be glass huts filled with honey, and the bees
will sound like zithers with honey on their strings.

My father will be there, his fingers full of flesh
and his voice above a whisper in my head. We will
commingle. Brother will mind me, and guard my hems
from rattlesnakes. There would be no innocence

without the option of a snake, as sight would be
so worthless without the sin of dripping fruit.
I am no-one's Marianne. I am no-one's seen or heard.
When I need to, I will shout orders from the echoing bell

and the red sky will thrum with requests from the empress!

WALLACE STEVENS IN PHILADELPHIA

I.

Without body, obscene, twitching meat,
muscle flooded with the brine of the ancient seas

which may have been, for all we know, such star color. Old universe,
horizon, at heart your age will give me

much simile to whistle with. Old man waiting
in me like a leper crouched behind

crystalline outcroppings while the missionaries'
torches pass. In shadow, I melt shamelessly.

II.

The gross one in her brown dress sits splayed in the dewy grass,
her stout arms, more like legs, out. The black chalk
and the textured paper on the death's head in the ring,
ossified willow parted in the middle. Brittle,
sharp segmented leaves—I couldn't tell you what their names were—

crinkle under her. She cuts white with thick strokes,
blizzard interrupted by a black wall falling upward.
She's almost done, the clever monkey!
Meanwhile, where her hand crimps at the mineral,
the ghost of "*Ira, son of Jab...*"

III.

An old woman pushes chopped ginger
into a fibrous mound with arthritic fingers.
On the edge of the dump, a hundred kids

are chasing a lizard into a melon. Red flames
contained in oil-drums, attended to by hobos.
This crystal globe sits well in my cupped palms,

prevents the squeezing fingers into making
fist. My hands ache: spiders finally settling in
among the perfect filaments, waiting for something blind and fat

to fly into the web. O green, uncertain fingers of the widow,
brush clean the sullied river bank!

A girl is watching a snowflake melting on the eyelid

of her brother. What is his blood doing,
that is what she thinks, his gray teeth framed
with chocolate. In the yard, the old woman's son

pulls a red leaf from the mouth of a toad
with his shrinking fingers. Warts. Perfumed
fingerprints beneath her nose, brushes

rain from the uncle's eyelashes.

IV.

The limestone post-office sparkles with ten million stars. He tucks
his cuffs into themselves, at his elbows, puts his hand-heels
on his chin. The gross elastic string tied on one end

to a plywood paddle and the other to a red rubber ball.
It thumps and pops to please the raised eyes
of the freckled boy with straw hair and the white shirt

striped with blue: Stevens strikes the briefcase
(the metal pegs on its bottom clanging
on the repeating leaf-pattern of the iron plate—)

to scare the moppet into stopping. The boy leaps
up an inch, and stops. Then, he sees *a nickel rolling in between
the scissors motion of a man in coat and tails,*

*and is gone (—leading down into the sidewalk—steam rising
up into the brisk clear blue above Philadelphia—wide streets
shimmering with the underwater flickering through shifting leaves). Opens*

*the paper sack, unrolls it, sleeve made for a stump. He picks the flint
bits and flicks them to the street, then pulls
one lemon drop between his fingers, yellow bug,*

and brings it to his lips.

V.

The editor's a fool, he smells like a fool, olive oil
and pipe tobacco, last night's rum and women. I like him,
though, I like his jagged sentences and jabbing fingers.
Be done with me, I think. A chair before a great window,
the inverse scarlet lettering of the restaurant's name
sweeping: the turning of the planet a calligraphic brush.

I think of beef, a biscuit, seltzer water and a pickled egg.
I think of fried potatoes stirred with onions, almost burnt,
sweet and fragrant, speckled with a little salt. We come
into the great hall where the presses spit the papers
after traveling the conveyor belts and metal spring-work
hooked for tubing. Rolls of paper, wheels the builders

of the pyramid of Ghiza may have rolled the limestone blocks
and polished roof of beaten gold that sat—
but I digress. The roar of printing is a train wheel's
on the rails. Not sea, not junks where concubines rattle
black and red enamel bracelets over tiles and sticks
while old men, cross legged on the deck, pluck tinny drones

from archaic instruments. No, not like that
at all. Burnside raps his paste ruby ring on the window. A thin boy—
high, dove's cheekbones show the old sot that he'll weary into
at the lever—snaps to attention, nods at me and turns,
to guard the flashing, repetitious pattern of the newsprint
blurring by him. Burnside catches sight of something, motions me

to follow him. He jerks the gun-metal door: a din of machinery
blasts forth. I follow him into the print room, where below us
the floor is iron mesh, the machine sinks down
into the shadows of the story underneath us. A trash can, inky rags
hung from its rim. He leans down and motions me closer.
He snaps his fingers at a pile of cardboard scraps, and I

bring him a square of it: he takes it, slides it toward the bottom edge
of the steel cylinder. "Ah," he sighs. He lifts the cardboard
to my face to show the injured mouse: thin faced,
black bug-eyed, scruffy, its entire body
a heartbeat, rapid and irregular, frozen
in its efforts to be hidden. "Look, a mouse," he says—

taps his finger on its cardboard floor to make it bounce,
scramble with its good legs on the surface without traction.
"Touch it," he says, "Touch
the mouse." I hesitate, but then I touch it, its fur
corn-silk curling from a husk, its heart barely a shadow
on my fingerprint inside the mouse's

kid-glove gray-spotted skin—and then he shoves it in his pocket--

a piston fools a gear, continues pumping, never catching—
 I feel myself there with him, lacerated
 by ten thousand swift, surprising wings,
 serene and without guise, as saints would be, on fire.

DISPATCHES FROM ELIZABETH BISHOP

I.

Orion lies in bits above the trees on the highway leading uphill
 to horizon—my mind refuses to connect the dots, leaves the hunter

there in tatters. I think that there must be something similar to Man,
 across the Milky Way, or further, equidistant from the first

bright thing, held there, a creation away from us, poised like Man,
 in balance with Man, on a shimmering string. Gentle women.

II.

*Beyond the road, with its decade-old warning of hazards,
 there are woods: despite the late hour, no condominiums
 or shopping malls have sprouted there. A tangled, sodden mess
 of branches. Leaves, long grass that snow has drained the green from,
 leaving yellow. Parted on one side by a stream
 of brown water pouring from a rusted pipe
 poking from the hill above which the road goes over. In a tree,*

*a blue jay sits, nastiest of birds, silent, unhappy ornament
 for a plain day's tree. There is nobody to bicker with. It is not
 his screech, nor rasp of feathers, that is heard:
 the low, gross hush of travelers fills the spaces
 between objects. The mailbox by the road is empty. The distant beep
 of a car. Shuffling of falling feathers onto grass. The blue jay flies:
 dart against the stalling sky, an augur's chill decision.*

III.

I wonder what the seahorses are doing under Iceland—sipping
from the polyps of a brown kelp like hummingbirds
with cornet beaks—

I can't remember if they drift in waters that are that cold.
I can't remember
where they are. I have only seen them

in textbooks, ridged like paper lanterns,
poised and delicate in glossy grays, dried, frightening
peppers with faces

like growths where the stem would have been. In Chinatown,
you see vegetables like this in shops, intricate coils
of stringy noodles tied with kite string, ducks hung,

bald, blood red, thieves hanged
along the store-front windows opening into

the cardboard box rows

of shiny, bulbous mysteries and translucent paper
sacks where something
oily hides. Comparison is vast. It motivates the onlooker

to mingle with his senses
what the mind would otherwise discard as extraneous.
On television,

there is that little natty sailor in his perfect whites,
his minuscule sailboat adrift
in the sparkling commode. The blue

promise of the water that he promotes
is as the mystery of the sea: turbulent and green,
roiling like a lobster pot

but cold. I always dream of it as blue
and placid, or absolutely black—
a mirror in which the moon reflects

a leper's face. The moon, I know,
is something that the earth lost long ago,
the symbol now for longing—

but it is the star behind it that I fail to see
in my mind's eye, its tiny point
a reminiscence for someone elsewhere

altogether, where the sun is

only one white speck (if color similar to ours
exists, or even eyes)

in a freckled patch of six or seven,
where from the side the bear becomes
a severed ring with our experience contained

along its suggestive rim. I am content
to be so small. I am unwittingly fascinated by the panoply—
the freak, false

or true, the Fiji mermaid, bristling
monkey carcass sewn painstakingly
to the curling lower body of a clumsy Pacific fish. If you slice

it open, sawdust and mothballs. Hurray!

IV.

“Autumn shivers papers: scarlet, yellow...”
I attempt to educate this child
ignorant of ice. “Not wasps,

but ice like blossoms
buzz at windows,
water dressed in shirts of sugar...” She won’t see

another season
than this pissing August
of monkeys and drunk whores. Alaska’s

porcelain minarets fail sodden bordellos,
wicker chairs where fat politicians
sweat, sip brandy, play bridge

awaiting turns bare. Faint shadows
limp from one corner to another, a young thief leans against
his uncle, giggles as his name is called

from a beaded fly curtain.
She sighs, saying that winter is very still,
like her mother’s eyes

as she lurches to confession.
No men. Doggedly, I draw
a clawed paw in orange crayon.

V.

I forget things in the kitchen which were in
my study. The cup I left

beside my hand when I fell in to sleep
is where it was, when I wake,

crawling from the window—there is a green
light in which the delta birds

reverberate, lightning in the yard.
The alligator flashes.

VI.

Pleats in the flipper.
The Cyclops' window of a scuba mask. Creepers
burning under silent banshees of Spanish moss

snagged in gull-gray
mangroves. Burnished pool. The green

of twilight and the bronze

of dawn. I am more a mirror
than these speckled nets for elements:
clod and ember, heavy air—my fingers

in the spotted petals
of the dahlia are as the lovers speaking
secret in the dark, lips forming

words against fingerprints, sounds
splitting into colors, forming
toward the texture of the finger,

the map of bud, the universe in précis.

VII.

Fans whirred. A mouse nibbled millet in the window. I set
candles, a paper owlet, marigolds propped
inside a silver pitcher (a slim gecko its handle), at the altar.
Her orange eyes wrinkled

beneath a veil. I had never seen a stranger human being
than this child: three fingers clawing
at the air, its oblong head a nest
of tiny veins, its silence centering

great howling
from its family. Its life would have been
a horror had she lived. A son
would not have been so gently slipped into swift and stilling water.

VIII.

On a road of wet clay, I hummed, shuffled
snapshots. The driver belched,
ate smoked oysters from a can
with stained hands. I nodded:
hooves itched at my fingers, slow pony nosing

at mangoes and sugar-beets in soft grass.
A small villa on a wall of egg-like stones
falls into a lake they say holds bones
of Christ and many cities. The drowning
house wanders to the black mouth

of a spring. Blind fish drop
rocks against scummy windows,
where a girl stares,

her emerald hair waving
like hands drawing in air before a blank paper.

IX.

I itch with chalk dust and old scotch. A six page poem
you sent me, coffee-ringed. Bleary with gin, I lean
on the transistor. You can't decide
which wife you'll pin this time
inside your scansion. The men outside

throw clouds of sand over their shoulders:
it beds in beads of sweat like flecks of gem. What wife,
the need for children's shoes, do they return to
when their backs are stiff with hours of work? My eye travels
up the road hacked out of jungle. From blue ceramic bowls

they shovel spoons of black beans; inside my square glass house
this orchid showers thoughts with bourbon. I made a joke
to a plump waiter whose hands smelled of violets, ate a pickled
quail's egg beneath neon...Cal, I'm never home. I hurt my finger
and I put it to the cockatiel's beak, rubbed up against those gorgeous

stripes for love. I am locked away inside each sip,
and the books on my shelves seem to be ready to fall
at any moment. Dark: I hear the children
in the village scrambling home, the wealthy ones chiming
their bicycles up the modest hill. I can't even go to sleep

for fear that fireflies will blink onto my lips and lift me off,
steam over the jungle. Someplace,
an aunt is making jam, is stirring
blackberries into hot sugar, or molasses, maybe.

Honey. Suet. What is sugar for? Here, the cane is angry
at the sun. I long for spare fields flickering with bluebirds, drying laundry.

X.

*Collapsing the thicket was the wind's one goal tonight—
it took its tea-kettle keen and moved the other way. The forest cringed:
arthritic twigs, what were trees and what were branches broken off
caught in the network of the swinging branches*

*was not clear. We are not here. We sit in a dark room, hands tied,
ceiling above us rushing up hundreds of feet high,
we know this by the bicker of our voices above us, pigeon-scuffling,
against the rafters. We know who else is here, breathing silently. The shift*

*of oxygen. Couples entering dark only widowers return from. I feel their outlines
with my tongue: the elements have scourged the earth and air together.
What's gone before means nothing now: straight lines in nature: lives spiral off
and up. The ghosts of those old hoodlums don't persist: we hold our breaths,
the crowd of us, and wait.*

XI.

Steam, just barely rain, stings
the palettes of my fig trees leaves.
She—my Lota—draws faces

in yellow sand with the silver tip
of her walking stick, her face
maroon in green light. Her hands and voice

are steady, but her black eyes flicker:
three days ago, I found her screaming
at a red-faced chimp, complaining

of complicity. Earlier that night
my eyes were clouded: a glass perhaps,
a samba on the patio stones,

a kiss beneath the moon:
subtle and gaudy flavors
that cannot be what's mine.

XII.

The Mongoloid in army green is pouring tea
out of a plastic pitcher
covered in the explosions of a dozen
yellow daisies. *Head Shop*. Red enamel Buddhas

with mirrored bowls for incense in their laps.

Cones of pine scent and patchouli pears. In the dark room
in the back, behind the pornographic
comic books, the posters in their swinging metal frames:

a naked thinker on his porcelain throne, a hand that reaches
from the toilet pulling, delicately, the dog-tag chain
of a bare light-bulb, Frank Zappa, psychedelic butterflies—
what is there left to do? It smells like arson: burnt hardwood

and metal smeared with char. The mob of long-haired
boys in trapper fringes, silk nightgowns hung
on moon-faced girls: spastic movement and rampant energy
misabeled freedom. A detonation is not liberty, nor is a conflagration

revolution. A myriad green parakeets fall down exhausted
on the smoking island rain has brought the forest fire to. The hollowed
exoskeletons of a dozen armadillos shine—shine, sheathed in the sooty rain.
Blue-winged horseflies spinning on the carcasses of donkeys

baked against a high rock wall.

XIII.

*The wind is at its business breaking
branches, bridge-chairs smashed into match-sticks
for burning. Furies of startled air, blown empty.*

*It is winter. The sound of snapping,
water trickling: nocturnal, still.
The owl and moon protrude in empty skies:*

*empty as a pocket
with a hand in it is empty. The thicket
quickens in the failing light.*

*A swooping, then a silence. Look
which way the trees are bent to hear
the almost howl of winter growing wilder. It sits*

*on my shoulder, kisses
my neck. No spark could light these woods
away, or be spirited from the dead wood*

*to build fires over which to warm the chill-set hand
or heat a rag of meat
to eke some nourishment from.*

XIV.

The snow is almost red beneath the black sky,
cloudy as a muscle with the blood beneath it. Across the field,

two horses set apart; surrounded by their yards,
a car or two, a pick-up truck, picket fences

and a dozen sorts of shrubbery, all of it in silhouette—
I could turn them upside-down with my two hands,

as if they were the dials
of a crystal radio—would this bring up the lights,

fill those thick, worried clouds
with winter whites and grays? I only have to shift
the smallest bit to hear a fearsome

crunch rise from the snow, it is
so still. My hands inside my gloves, inside
the pockets of my coat,

are still so cold I think I feel
the pointy, fluted bones of my fingers
poking at the freezing whirlpools of my fingertips.

The sound there is—
distant traffic—slow air moving on the crystals
of the sweep from conifers and oaks

behind me to the settlement below. It's almost
nothing, magnified. A silence like the tracks
ring when a locomotive just escapes from earshot.

Like a pod of whales makes in the ocean,
lullabies and warnings
that our clumsy hearing misses, up on deck

with our sunshades, gin & tonics,
talk of breakfast. It is in the absence of my agitation that the deer
become clear to me. *Look at me,*

my spotted ones. Vigilant and sly—
one, far to my left, three who stand together,
in a triangle of antlers,

swan-thin necks and alert bodies. I am amused
that they are facing
toward me, and their stillness falls before me

as a sign
of great respect, or fear. *Look at me:*
I have been living a long time. Alone,

surrounded

by my loves. *Look at me*: I am thirsty, salt,
and I have left so little. *Look*

at me, you leaping, stealthy bastards—look at me!

THE BOOKSELLERS

Slim and squat rectangles pull away from me, quivering in the corner of the poetry reading room. I feel old: I'm not so old, but older than I thought I'd be. I eat alright, fingernails growing quickly without my biting (Thank god for sex! Not what I'd imagined, but better, if I keep my sense of humor, and a naked friend, which is why I'm here: to keep my clothes on, and my friends. Right now, I want them off, happier without me.) Now, you light on my hand, gnat.

O Jesus, don't befriend me. I should kill you, but I don't. You know, kid, in plays it's the idiot who knows what the skinny is. Yesterday, I talked to Jacob's daughter: I'm not clear on what the little lord and I discussed but it was genial and serious, and not as good as nursing. Leigh clamped her back, kept me talking until Jake came home. We haven't spoken, for no reason, for a year or two. What could I say to him? The family man whose family

I wanted to be. Leigh puts him on: he doesn't mention Norm, his dad: the crack-up, his relief that the old man's packed away. Leigh told me that. Instead, we talked L.P.'s: collection growing in the place of making music. I sold mine for tickets west. Not drinking

with the kid and all. I say: that's good, Jake. Don't quite know how to socialize, but Leigh likes taking in a film now and again. I tell him that I'm sapped of awe, mixing daily as I do with big names, waving

papers in their faces. I tell him that the apology in his voice is absolutely wrong for not moving toward creation—chatter in the background: cooing. Squawking. First words—busy with a family's tedium and honey, complications I would drowse in, uncertain as I am whether I should purchase more canned goods, where my next best bed will be. I tell him how it is here: fighting off the urge to please, nearly thirty. Over hill, as far as gay goes. Trying to convince my chums

of what a bad-ass that I've been. Really: mean. I've been in jail. I bit a fucker once for looking at me funny. Laughs. I miss him. How we egged the halls with mischief, scratching pennies that we'd roll into acid, or whiskey. Romantic thieves that we were not ever, really. The truth is, I don't need him now: shrugging off forgotten crimes of nights before as I skulked uncertainly repentant at the chain. I put the phone down, slowly, like a poem unfolding only as my eyes trail from the paper,

considering his voice. Put my coat on, gloves. Head down against the wind, with certain purpose, walk. Frost, barely on the sidewalk, glittering like limestone in the beams of passing cars. Then, the door beneath pink bubble beauties perching in a scarlet heart. The loneliest are here. I see them every night: for instance, Jimmy, his face shifting in a blue glow, as if the man were watching Greek fire under water, waiting for his knight. Or Jose: nearly forty, perpetually student, handsome to his hands. He keeps his lips against

the pulse of lousy humor, so much ice he needs to break. Or Tom. Or Louis. Darting to the doors to be the one to breathe in the most beautiful: the frat-boy out for suck. Drunk, a hole's a hole to him. The rest of us? We seldom speak, but when we do, we speak of love, what that would be, evidenced to us only as entranceways, or warning. I suppose our friends withered as we came. Downstairs: the ghetto of latex implements, lurid dolls and photographs of smooth lads that we never were. We should

be girls. We should be men. Husbands. Fathers. Gone is what these shadows say, slouching in corners, cigarettes like drunken fireflies lighting on their lips, falling near their laps, then up again. A clink of buckles, then a hiss of video women screaming to be plumbed. But I have secrets, too. This mouth: the chance to melt a body there. I give, for fear of what? Jim, for fear of what? It is not the end that is so terrible, but the weary crunch of rubbers against snow beneath weighted firs. The gates

of houses where widows, even isolate, await hands contoured to theirs, or at least the arms of law, as mine this pen. On Earth or in Heaven, what is there for me to celebrate? I am in too far—there is a little hole shaped like an owl pressed into drachmas for me to love, and a latch to hold who watches out. Now, I'm here, staring at these spines. I see my hands grow thin at the knuckle, pull taut across the blue branches in my wrists,

light growing dim around my shoes—but harsh, lighting sharply

the threadbare seersucker of my legs, the knees: little skulls, the punch-line of sex predicted by the cracker-crumbs powdering my lap—what is that old fool doing in the stacks? Jacob's daughter, thirty now, bilingual, thumbs through Hesse, watching me from the edges of her eyes as she skims a bad translation: she recognizes me from photographs, maybe, but she's not sure what to say, or worse, thinking her quick getaway when I look down to dry my hands against my shirt. She's come here with her kids. The brats

are making too much noise in the remainders. I've been South, in fact been seventy, all of sixteen minutes. The peanut gallery is cluttering my aisles, snapping at the pockets of my friend—he's here! I can't see his face for leaping fingers, a spill of nickels—nickels! Loops of licorice. Now he has turned away and this little black-eyed boy—he's—what? seven? eight? edges toward me. His sneakers flashing hazards. His face a little apple gremlin glistening with snot—what do I do? Shoo him away? Pluck him up

into this old man's arms and squeeze, hoping that some little nonsense, something warm, will coax itself from me, his fingers wrapped around the unkempt scraggle of my neck? Should I gather him into my wild cloak, lift him spinning into the air above electronic calendars and what is winnowed now of rhyme? Or will he stare, terrified by the wrinkled, hawk-like visage staring back at him, the one thing he must be? If he were my kid, he would know to run.

BIRDWALK

Men have come to water to be cleansed, to grow. A man can break his fingers trying to love the company. Look: a speed-boat skids the gray waves of a dog-day bay's mirage; its buzz could be a lawnmower, electric razor, or a lone cicada droning in aluminum and brick behind me. Near the low waves, nothing can be hidden in polluted saline or the baking kelp: the tide has swept a half-mile plain of hand-mirrors and bubbles breathed by crabs. In cracks between stacked sandstone slabs, beads of Styrofoam and plastic baggies are the unborn hopes of neon-hooded

jellyfish: bodies without appetite. A girl, a blur of black and Popsicle on a bicycle, passes benches, merges with the pylons of the band-shell. Yellow police tape corrals vestigial crowds within grids of orange oil-drums. A man-made pond is stoppered by a corrugated tube. Six-pack plastic rings collide behind a mallard paddling its reflection: Band-Aids, boxer-shorts and scumbags float in white froth

at the water's edge. Near me, horseflies grumble and descend
through the mirrored Möbius strip of a torn-open chip bag.
Six cigarette butts stubbed out in my sneaker-nudged crater.

No man can be alone, with his pants around his ankles,
without the nag of crass opinion scrawled in poesy. Kids,
in school or alleyway, dismantling syntax. Their elders
condemning poor Shakespeare from the crimes of his king. No-one
loves a hoodlum know-it-all. Deconstructive jargon, Jeeves,
or jive, I cannot praise the tongues of academies or streets. My clients
are consumers bred to bore: computer mutants. To them, I am a map
without Alaska, or Hawaii. Maria loves "The Rat Pack"—really.
Music: I can enter into them through this portal. I lean in,
cup my hand behind my ear. When they speak on task, it is

so quietly that I have to beg them to repeat, or draw in.
I have been taught to back away, to force them into reaching me
with volume. I have never seen this work. I don't know why
they cringe from questions as if their words were clouds
of stink. Melanie draws cryptic dragons on her paper's margin.
Aaron is basketball. Vartek has a brother who is both seven
and a "pin in ta ass." Demons are dissuaded by dismissals
from the cherished thing. Anna does not know that the baby
in her belly is the failure of a nation. Aaron has never touched
a hare, bent his sad black eyes into the sideways, frightened iris

of the thing whose spastic heart would not remind him
of a sailor's snare, musket fire, or the quiver of a peacock

to the crumbs around his bleached Adidas. Would not be
a hummingbird, but then: when has the imagined been jettisoned
with vice? Megel spells his own name incorrectly.
Has no idea that "mouse" is not another "rat". Steinbeck's rabbit farm
drifts in a haze I must negotiate through hope. There is
nothing about dialect that Scots can't be fucked out of
by Ebonics. These children disappear. Bishop's villanelle
lies scattered like skinned game among the scrambled desks.

If I speak of skin, it would have to be of mine, not theirs.
It would have to be the rapist with the pen-knife on the thin
boy's throat: whispering to be loved. I want everything
for them, but my presence, here before them, is foreshadowing,
and so: I'm safe. I am technique, a method, just a switch. I am
The Man. Pretense and cliché. My history is nothing to them
but a wound that they can tear from when I ask them to be better:
they presume that I have seen the worst. They accept the musk
of crack cocaine that they cannot shake out of their hair.
They accept that there is nothing that I cannot have them do,

and they do nothing in revenge. They accept the officer

who enters, commanding: "Hands out on the desks. Purses open." Frisks them, one after another. They don't want to hear me say that homework is a path out of this concrete shut-down of a day. They know that Steinbeck's George and Lennie are pretend, and white, which is the same difference to them. They become excited by the strangulation of handy Curley's wife, but they forget. Who knows what they are on. Megel, Aaron, Lester call out to cull my class into the pit that they have dug, that they clearly think is dark. Not darkened. Dark. There is

sunlight on the lips of dirt that plummet to them underground. I tell them that Crooks is lying, that his spine was twisted in a lynching, and he fibs to save his face. They don't know what lynching is, exactly. To ask my help would mean to bear to me the pink palms of their masters. In theory, those without will drown within the thinking of the few who rise: balloons toted off by birds into clouds that ring with cries of the children who let go of them. My kids are not exactly nouns, nor I a verb. We are not facts. I have been invisible behind counters and suspect in the shops. I cannot speak of Justice

without "Law," or "God". There is nothing theoretical about the skin that falls with chalk into the cracks of bleached linoleum and faded slate. In this room, we have all smelled the genius of the mortgaged house. For the first time, on the last day, they are silent. No. Attentive: the young men did not enter sporting Du-rags,

the girls did not flaunt cell-phones. Good. They slump, or lean back, nonplussed, in the seats assigned to them. My nemesis, Pantero, is startled into argument, but dumps his body where I tell him to. He stares into the middle

distance. Make a liar out of me, I want to tell them, counting pencils I have brought for them, sharpened, piled into a petrified honeycomb among the cedar shavings. I tell them that anyone who paid attention half of the time could pass. Their failure is my fault. It is all for me. How weary any of these kids must be, gliding aisles of booths with serving trays, making change for third-shift smokers. Eleventh grade, and the summer creeping up to it. The supermarket meat-room, and my first shift high. The stink of saw on bone. Humiliation: a paste of gore and bone-meal in my eyebrows

and my ears. Scrawling poems into the wax paper squares by the burger press. Leadless groves of lust and crush. I am unrequited graphite. I can see Pantero wing himself, see that Melanie hides possibility behind awkward English, touches the pencil as if it might awaken. Anna knows what her child is: she has told me of Ste. Guadeloupe, borne

upon the baby's poised, triumphant hands. Too late, I have
 the quiet that I wanted all along. Failure is defiance,
 not stupidity, the hubris of the Def. It is all we own.
 The Gwendolyn and Zachary of them implore to me, reflected

in their desks. I place my pencils down upon my best-laid
 plans. By the door, as I close it, I catch a Bic-scratched face:
 pinned among the sheets of caricatures of Steinbeck's characters
 a parody of me that I tear straight down from its tack,
 fold as I cross the room to shove him in my bag. "Hey there,
 Captain Poetry, with your cowlick and your hidden skin-tight
 tighties, check us out!" In *comix-sprach*, my *doppelganger*
 has been kyboshed; however, this catcher's caught. My corny
 45's are cracked. Basho on the wagon. Trained phony,
 and John Lennon's dead twenty-three years. They saw me:

blowsy in the folds of my fine, rice paper wings
 tattooed with the indigo of fine jade pots, arms akimbo,
 wrapped in haiku calligraphy. I thought of them
 as cloth: coarse burlap, utilitarian. I believed in it,
 could feel the thick threads interlocking, pulled apart. I loved
 the tears it had, the snags. I could see that it was something
 someone had woven. It was a surface that I could change for.
 But ink spread in the fibers like rainwater makes turgid
 the phloem vessels of a branch, hollyhock sprung to free
 its clutch of June bugs. Punk. Prodigy. My hand

was huge, a mountain drowsing in negative space,
 pestered by red signatures. Sound waves and merriment: *but*
 became *buttress*, *except* truncated to *egg*, *gone*
 was *Geronimo*! They talk amongst themselves because I told them
 not to. I am elsewhere, by a phone booth, my cape
 poking out of my fly. Honored or ridiculed, realized
 or objectified? A teal idea will never turn a pinewood spindle,
 a prismatic fractal tree unaware of the wood-lice on a fungus,
 the politics of *How* supplants the anarchy of *What*:

the frog prince took the chapel perilous
 upon a piebald mare. God bless grammarians, spinsters and incurable bachelors
 mooning for a muse, the orphic harp. But He damns us all.
 How pious have these children been to spurn the fruit. I have
 had my taste. I have read that, fossilized in shale, we find
 that rarity: the soft-bodies of the great blossoming
 of the many-celled of Five Great Kingdoms. Cambrian diversity,
 and such orders lost: tripartite exoskeletons with tufted feelers,
 five-eyed slugs, thousand-bladed balls, a dog-sized shrimp-faced lobster...
 and an inch or two of white slime held together, end to end,

by a nerve, from anus to antennae: the Eve of every vertebrate.
 I want to tell them, "Hey, we have already made it through."

I want to shake them: "Wake up. There is a hole in New York City."
The thieves creep from the ramparts to the temple. We are not watching,
and we will not watch. Look up at that star, our sun. Now,
based on what you've learned, predict where we will go from here.
Clouds rumble, full of motorways. Beetles hum in every inch of spruce
beside the college dorm, a Christmas tree infected
with their brazen wings. They rattle, fall upturned
on windowsills. The ferry moves across the dark, a constellation

of a wedding cake. The horizon of His body hurts my hand.
Who can I tell, "We called these beetles Japanese when I was a boy.
I am terrified of adjectives no wonder I'm alone." Their Christ
wants me in hell, hell, and the altar where the lamb's blood
broils is mine? I watch the sea unfold itself myriad times,
a pleated muscle, like a heart. Tendrils, insubstantial tissues,
beating on the shore. My love is nowhere to be seen: he is
among his family, his complications and his traps. I am a friend
of Bill's and Dorothy's. I have come down to the water
to wait my turn within his sleeping. It is where I came from.

REST-STOP, MINI-MART

My favorite trucker hunkers in with eyes like hawks',
crushed forward, darting with amphetamine and Jolt. Diesel
greases his scarred cheek, his forearm. I watched
the shadow of a man stumble down
out of the cab, belt swinging open, zipper wide

as the jaws of the lemon shark. Must have
sucked the spunk from him, rinses his mouth out at the sink,
skulks behind the cardboard coffee cup
swirling on a string. Combs his hair back,
water on his fingers. Above him,
vents rotate the laminated cylinder
in and out of three dimensions. Won't meet

my eyes. I see him
with his throat thrust back,
his Adam's apple sliding up and down:
mongoose in a boa's gullet
melting in the dark. What I want
cannot be realized in language, or in
Spanish. His legs tensed in nets of vein, akimbo
arms on swiveled hips—
his cooling body smells happy. I would piss

this all away
to wake to find the star-map of his morning beard
imprinted on my cheek. I have
the body of an ape. My tongue is blunt. I want
to kiss him white again. This textbook says that
our ancestors parted at a mountain pass, that their bones

might be folded in the sheets of limestone
that respired from ancient algae
beneath inverted mountains made of rain
that fell ten million years ago
and will be rain again. Why wouldn't it say that.

TRIP

Everything I touch
becomes a spasm in my thoughts. Brick. The mortar
in between. I touch it. Feel the cage of white that spreads up
fifteen stories with its writhing catch of bricks. I want
to sleep. Sleep won't eat me
until morning. Morning brings

the sun. The curb. The street. A leaf turns over
like a page. Calico staring at me. Licks his forepaws
with three tongues. Car horn burns across my forehead, match struck
on these thinkings. Ray reaching

underneath my chin, up

to flick my nose. Got me. Helicopters
dropping rain on me from clouds. Clouds arrange themselves above me
in a silver web. The moon. Six tabs. My teeth hurt. My jaw. Strychnine
packs my bones full of smoky cotton, each hole,
every socket, aches. Prisoner
inside my skull. My girl wants me

to suck her toes, but I don't want
to suck her funky toes. Panties smell like salmon
baked with peaches. My armpits stink like skunk. Or skunk,
is that skunk splattered on the front wheels of that Dodge? The bells
of St. John's peal. Notes splash before me, on
me, raindrops in my muscles, the puddles
of my eyes. The rings spread. Shiver. I reach

out to taste them with my fingers and they taste
like cherries, wind. The choppers
swoop low. My eyelids drop
in unison with them. There is five hundred dollars
in a rubber up my asshole and a baggie full of X. There is
a little girl in the tree. Paper dolls. She dangles

from their throbbing bodies like a mop. The cat crawls
inside me, keeping from the rain. His whiskers poke
my ribcage, ten spines of polished glass. I am telling you
that cat crawled up my crack. When he purrs, it must be me.

RUSHES

All day the blasts of hot air
hurt my head. I bump the nozzle, brass
worn down to nickel, with my elbow: into place. On the tray,
the Mellor pot swirls with ten thousand stamped sized leaves
dyeing the water red. The children from St. John's appear
in packs to gather up the almond scones, their ritual
cups of cocoa. I am invisible, a mother

supplying provisions in their changeless privilege
for a little change. The taste of oranges on lettuce
is the taste of grief. It spreads out on my tongue, failing light
spilling on the death's-head head-stones

propped among the pinecones, fallen nests and antlers
of summer branches, cheated out of scarlet,
in the graveyard behind the black iron fence. By noon,

the women in their power suits pour in. The men. I dodge them
like a salmon might thrust against the barrage
of logs up river with a tray poised on my fingers. One hour,
I pine for things I read on break, sipping up
the flecks of fresh cilantro from a bowl
of thick soup churned from winter squash: black ore crusted nuggets
formed around a sea-shell, beer can, dime
let drop from starboard by a girl

who saved all summer for the stuffed seal
in the cruise-ship's gift-shop. I worry
for Rachel's baby, for Ross and Joey. I see
my father under the lemon tree, rain prickling my arms
as I picked through the dregs of my grandmother's tea
in the butterfly mug. The cold of the rain
in the shape of my feet as I padded up quickly

the ramp to the cabin. The black boy with the green
scabbarded dagger. The cockatiel's shriek. The mirror
that opened the north wall to the poltergeist's house. Beetles
the size of my hand lit melon green from underneath, but I
have never been elsewhere. In this apron,
I'm an animal. I look up at the balcony:
a woman with a white net hat and ginseng tea still seeping
looks down through me to the chessboard of the floor. My wristwatch snags

the pink thread of a girl's monogram: she pulls
her name from me. *Missus, look, think of the little ones
who come here, incomplete and ready to be filled
with will. Men who touch women's cheeks, completing
a circuit. Squares of green and white-painted wood:
lemonade stands, 5¢ a cup. A sister in family. Sons
thriving for the daughters, do you think I think I am making this up?*

MY HEART ACHES FOR THE BAOBAB, THE GUT-STRUNG HARP

I remember everything by the pain my bones leak,
sliding between my muscles. Slapping Louise, playing,
her pinching my nipple between trees in knee-high
iron cages peeling green. I expect cheering, pull
back, hands bent in, in shame. Coach pats my back:
the ridges of his palm-print cuts
my skin. By summer, my shoulders are maps
of the keloids of a hundred hand-traced turkeys. Spring: I run
the highway, make my back strong for the feed-yard
of his manly tenderness.

Kiss. Sun and moon are mine

behind my eyelids, the mountain makes night jealous
 of its blackness. Purple. Indigo. The polestar
 with its feathers fair and even
 on the dromedary and the nomad
 with his calabash jug slogging water
 squeezed from roots.

Her lips taste
 of raspberries and grease. I could swim
 in the ointment of her kisses. Above us,
 gulls cry with their wings nipped by the chimneys
 of the recycling plant. A black wing
 glittering blue and green jewels
 curls at the bare root of the dogwood. I part her
 like curtains. When I want to be deeper, she says,
 "I hid, flat under grandma's bed
 from lightning." Little sister Thunder

lags behind. She holds the wind back, her hands
 in my hands. Her breasts: orbs I want to dunk
 again and again in the hoop of my arms. Africa
 is a map on the back of America. When I am old,
 the bark of my elbow's skin will remind me
 how I held her ears in my teeth, pressed her
 into the refrigerator behind the Laundromat, its door
 off its hinges. The hemp rope holding it behind
 grinding into her coccyx, our legs glistening and drying
 in the blasts from the dryers: I watch my feet
 under her feet as I squeeze and strain against
 the push of Little Petey. Specks of lint rising and falling,
 my body a god in the harbor freckled with great ships. Ache
 and sympathy for suffering. Fish-eyed views of sea
 and empty skins tumbling in the rotating drums. My heart aches
 for the baobab, the gut-stringed harp. They are painted
 in the mural of the Laundromats side-wall.

POLLIWOGS

When he came into me, I felt myself collapse around him and I burped
 three ways. Leaned back. Watched the oval
 of white light hovering over the gas pump
 flicker off. The attendant walked over to his car. He stood.
 He pushed and turned the key. My breath
 made a little white girl's mouth against
 the glass. She grew. He pulled up his sweatpants.
 She shrunk. A jangling of loose change, cell phone,
 keys. *Thank you, baby.* What I said. He
 rolled from off of me onto the driver's seat

The fingertips tapping the smudge of their fingerprints for the throats of the Pixistix.

*I stood behind her, wrapped
around her leg. She bought me a ruby ring, a clear, blood red jewel
around a yellow plastic plug. Under my tongue,
the stone sweetened and slipped into pungent cherry.*

The tongue's bent arrowhead tracing horizons of Gobstoppers.

*August flared pink and purple,
seeped into trees across the lot.*

The boyhood spent hunched over boxes of Mars Bars, Bazooka and Charleston Chews:

*Two girls tossed a plaid rabbit between them
until a car gutted it.*

They crack clean when frozen, flake from brittle middles.

*The trees: perfect silhouettes, intricately cut.
Behind them, the north star swam down through deep indigo.
The moon, its beautiful
scars.*

The grocer: biting his moustache, squinting up
at the cigarette rows—folded mirrors, four-color wrappers—down
to the scalp of the boy.

*Daddy came home: there was
yelling. Scratching. Grandma fried pickles in the black pan.*

They crack clean when frozen, flake from brittle middles.

*I came to and fell back into sleep
in the bunches of grandpa's blue shirt, pulled up
around the biceps, above the elbows. His skin
smelled of cherry tobacco, talcum powder, Vitalis.*

Crawdads are scavengers but will eat what is small enough.

*You can find this smell
in the egg crate behind the winter boots
in my parents' closet: cooking, and smoking, and perfume.
The stole with the fox face jerky on the skull.*

White-wax coke bottles pumped with juice slog in reed and cat-tail, bubbles of lye.

Mommy scratched at the lighthouse

in circles of sea grass on the notepad. Nothing much happened.

“See here,
baby,” the man says, sliding his cracked hands
across the buttocks creased with blood.

*Bad news a lizard
digesting hyrax in the ten feet of dandelions, slapping
its fat tail on the latch of the gate.*

The blue ink of the meat-stamp
bleeding into the cotton bulged in the back pocket over the wallet.

The tick of a moth on the lampshade.

Wipes his hands
against his wife and daughters.

*The drip of the water one foot
to the frying pan.*

The banana yellow valentine of the bicycle seat herded with nickel-sized pintos.

*No one paced city limits with flashlights, pointing
German shepherds through underbrush and gravel.*

They crack clean when frozen, flake from brittle middles.

*No one asked to take Wilson’s blanket
for the snouts of cadaver dogs.*

They crack clean when frozen, flake from brittle middles.

*No flyers with his eyes
staring out, black holes gathering the light of awareness without
flirtation. “You can see this in boys,” the cop said,*

“If I was the river, baby, I’d be happy to hold you.”

The stole with the fox face jerky on the skull.

The cigarette money slipped between two twenties.

The stole with the fox face jerky on the skull.

The paper sack clutched by the clamps of two ankles.

The stole with the fox face jerky on the skull.

Sneeze: blood spatters Madge soaking her fingers.

squeezing the back of his neck,

Rolls between stones, his ankle twisted in chain

*dangling his hat in the front of his ass
from the thumb on an arm bent backwards.*

still clogged with grease meant to swallow the teeth of its gears,

*Archie ate bad mushrooms, got a shot.
Rhoda bought Mary a rotisserie oven,
an egg. Grandma out of pickles, frying ice: dropping the cubes
into hiss and skitter.*

They crack clean when frozen, flake from brittle middles.

Nothing much happened.

down-river
where the trout flick through tendrils of sunlight
searching the water-weeds for finicky crayfish.

*The eagerness to please. The fascination with all things
metal, wooden, flesh. "That you can expect from boys, gets them
all manner of trouble."*

*Crawdads are scavengers
but will eat what is small enough.*

Handlebars weighted with quart cans of clementines,
tangled duct tape and twine. Mist under the cellophane. Red leaves,
gold, and orange. Then, brown: twigs on the river, then rain, then rain.

WHAT JEFFERY DAHMER DID ON HIS SUMMER VACATION

I.

The gore was hot upon my hands,
steam rose into the silver of the coming storm—96° Fahrenheit. Fahrenheit
falling, chilling, coagulants taking hold into the wrinkles
of my fingers. Breath

bellows the skunk's lungs. Fur spurt on the shots of brine

and stink that tell me: *Yes, this too came from the sea.*

Were the waters red, ink blue, black—lightning snapped there on the tides,
lava oozing from the heaps of mountains peeling from the seabed to the surface,
before

chlorine became chlorophyll, inventing green? Boys,
the sky, land sea, and I, the fire contained, meet

among the treasuries of skeletons spilling
on the shore. There was meat in there, there is
meat in here and I am the beacon that the moths
and prophets come to, to be eaten.

II.

I am cold, unfolding, be
masked, undone for me—I would be barricade,
lie down, be a window at root level
underground. Be black. Dangle, curl and squeeze wings,
pane after pane of grafted petal—
and you, there, sitting on the best friend's bed, a book
spread out across your lap, your eyes
cocoon with chrysalis inside, tearing of the sticky sac,
and then, a thousand butterflies, flicker of willow yellow—

winter twilight blue. Ten thousand
opening and closing at the window, pushing at the glass,
glass—were a man to be standing
in the clouds of them, my hands raised
to my eyes, my mouth closed, dumb, peephole anyway, or sky—
I hope that you are steadfast, gentle, free—
the threads—the maze through thorn and bramble,
light a confusion of leaf—
refracted green and shifting vines—
I bent against the furnace, my lips, just barely parted,
with your lips against them, fine threads
hanging, swinging from our chins—

III.

Kittens. I finished them. The saws keened, cicadas
rattled in the pods. His hand sick
with heat against my back, soaked

with me. His spectacles slipped down the knobbed slope
of his nose. The dogs had some, then threw it up

into the air and caught them, 2 or 3 from 5. A pinball,
mercuric, sliding in the grooves with slats.
Hot brown gum, pink crater and fang. I watched
his left wrist as we walked, he was too close

to look directly at, my eyes twitched, had to slide my head
 to let his scarlet head eclipse the sun, that's when
 I saw him scratch his pinky with his thumb, the nail
 grinding into it, or trying to, the angle was
 all wrong, and then he dropped the sack.

IV.

The tablecloth kept coming at these fingers. Tool box spoke,
 dented trilobite and sweet antennae in my mouth. I stuck my tongue out
 to show mama. I tear the heads off GI Joe and lick
 his smooth pink crotch. The candle on the picnic table,
 beeswax in the grooves between the eyes. Quicksilver
 is the runner's ankle and the snake, peeled, split down the side.
 The mathematics of the human windpipe and the wind, touching
 the things I leave, discreetly, in the woods. Birds eat the bees' wings
 and the feathers eat the hands. The hands I left there,
 and these hands. I remember the taste of soap
 on the nipples, so small and multiple beneath the microscope—

the cells left from him spin. Volcanoes: coming.
 Sinews wizened in the coffee can. His mouth, a tabernacle
 where the naked choirboys strum upon the tongue.
 I look down his throat to watch the victor masturbate.

DRAWING CHILDREN DRAWING

I.

The deaf one walks up to the board and turns

his eyes away (one sees with him here the blur
of bows and ribbons dark on green, the cursive
of a woman's loping hand stained into slate,
a winged abstract continental Q in red
swabbed black by sponge or towelette)
but we have left him there. See? Look

how his cheeks drag back his lips to bare
the flinty teeth, transparent, fluted near the tongue
that lifts itself, flipper-like, all muscle
as the brown boy shrieks: his voice a violin,
a yodel, Doppler-whoopie-whistle, gun,

off pitch, of course, or without pitch, a Webern
scrape and crash, low tones the older of us
hear as flutter, how stars are sending
rumors of their dim collapse, perhaps

long ago imploded in a vengeful gravity, how we
are drawn into his cry. Indeed, light
flies to him, and if you know the Alpine voice

rising like a pelican above the frozen smoke,
above the curled ram's horn on the thin, white lips, why,
we are lost in him. And then he weeps, his hands
turning on their sides, up to his eyelids, sweeping down,
but we can see he's crying. What we miss

is this: the totem pole of white gloves against black
he dreams the night. What would we be
to him if he were mad? Surely, a symphony of hands,
fat fingers booming, thin ones staring him
into frost-bitten thumbs with jagged nails
pushing him against the wall. The cruel radiation
of a soggy rabbit's ears, imperial, commanding him
to ponder government, a rag that chases him

toward dark with implements imbedded in its fibers:
his hands are in the chalk, the chalk is letting go
into the splash and rippling rings of fingerprints.
Here was he lost to us: his fingers signaling

themselves, blurring the air, his planes of visions
shed of the approximation of an understanding
gleaned from imperfect lips. How the whale

feels, paralyzed before the blinking mouths of fish
dangling lanterns from their foreheads. The fish
are blind, the light attracts the foolish sighted

but the whale, being cumbersome, merely drops its jaws
to let the shoals into the band-shell of its mouth,
then closes, stalagmites and stalactites, baleen,
feathered bone and gum hanging down in pulpy
hills of freckled membrane. I wish

I could be swallowed whole, to see them twitching
down the corridor of throat, stumbling children bearing candles.

II.

I will watch them from the center, out, this way
I may turn the paper
and not smudge their heads away,
their ears a trick of light
between the stray hair
and the chin. They are young enough, their faces
bland, all rounds and edges,
sharp around a shaded center
and one of them is drawing—what—

*the doors opened to the spring, warm sweet breath,
the mud and mingle of the worms' lifting from the dark.
An egg-faced man in gabardine, a moon on stilts, a whale
whose ragged pulpy mouth is bleeding krill from baleen
and on the line the twisting, silver muscle of a trout, its belly spotted, its eye just so,
an iron slug submerged in motor oil. The frowning hounds of Easter
arced like boomerangs hoisted by themselves into the helicopter-chopping of their
flight,
all angle, oval knocking at the bird to make it pay its tithe to gravity and light, the
erratic
flashing of the pulses in the nerve nets,*

and that is where the ink wash fails—to climb
out of the faded gazing of morning into the discomfort of texture,
of the bald neon bright,

how the goshawk with its scythe of wing
lifts up and leaves that flat blue broken mirror
and that dissipated sun behind. In, then,
into it, the planetarium,
the mica lenses where the light
twists, where monument changes
from a glancing
to an electric curtain
straight into the monopoly of the moon,
the crackling spoonful. Then,

we are reflected back, and out,
spiraling and rocketing from the cold pool,
blood and salt dreck, from the tackle-box,

combining with spittle
and the crushing hug of memory,
all blue, slow wavelength
and the hum and grumble

of graphite on the square of paper
drawn to mimic paper
on the real surface of the thing—

and will they be there at the tables
when the year is done, the next,
their thinning hands and faces drawn
across their skulls
bending to the shavings,
laughing, throwing pencils, there tomorrow—

who will try to prod them awake and then what?

RAY

I see him, swimming standing up, his eyes beaming wide with pride, his hands wagging exaggeratedly like a hieroglyphic pansy in a slow and strobe-lit motion,

creatures of the deep breathe in translucent skins drifting down around his body, x-ray clear
and delicate test-tubes, their inner organs coiled and sprouted, pastel-shaded fungi

inside, everything illuminated by a beam of light, it is so dark (for lack of surface light)
the lamp can catch the refuse, animal and plant, that falls into its scope and never fall

on anything, its end or at its edges. Who holds the lantern must be very cold and envious. In a film, you would not linger long across these stupid things,

the million species no human eye had seen, or seen alive, without encountering the long-fanged thing, the bloody neck stump or the glittering city underneath its great

room-service-dome of glass, lit green like lightning bugs, from within. The sound of underwater almost like a muffled squeak of long balloons twisted closed, then twisted

into skinny animals of puce or pink, like him, wiry and weird. You know this, but are watching,
wave *the birthday clown* away, *the candles and the piñata*. It makes the sea

a seashell and the ear a sea, held up to moonlight, where the breakers sparkle with the messages the moonlight writes there as it pulls them. Stop.

Stop.

They weren't drunk. The roads had thawed, were barely wet, you see, the thaw —
the water had been ice only a few hours earlier, was only three fingers deep. *You see him*

with his back to you, his back against the marble-patterned pillar and him, cross-legged on the gray cement spotted with cigarettes and chaotic planetary maps

made up with discarded gum. You are me, and I am telling you I saw him, he looked lost, *just sitting there, waiting for the late bus, a few others huddled, smoking*

as the snow fell, and the light grew dim, you thought "How sad he looks, just sitting there,"

this boy you knew forever, in a shallow way, but friendly, his adopted brother

a close friend in Kindergarten, now a bit beyond hello, his dad your soccer coach,
the one who made you take your shirt off—stop. He’s drifting there, he’s being funny

there against the lamplight but that wasn’t it, that wasn’t where he ended, why else
go this far to show you just his body and the spiky shrimp, the fluttering, cowled
phantom

of the giant squid—it was a quarter-mile of road, angled like an S through a not-too-
crowded

wood. *It was*
the place your mom and dad would sing “The Teddy Bear’s Picnic” in those long
journeys

home,

how angry and how sore you’d feel by the time you disappeared into that tunnel,
only to reappear, as the landmarks of your neighborhood grew more frequent, almost
dull:

the filling station turned 7-11, the Pignone’s rotten shack where the goat stood
blinking at

the traffic,
the Elementary School, and then the whining to be taken home the first way when
your

father would,

perversely, drive the 2nd stop. It was just before your 18th birthday, February. Or it
was March.

You know
that he was just a little older, you worked—Stop.

Stop.
Stop. Stop.

The road. He and John were in the 3rd guy’s car,
you didn’t know that one—you’d ridden, stoned out, with your head out of the
sunroof

screaming into speed—before or after? Before or after? *In the morning,*
hear the bluebirds sing. They budge their bodies from the nests. Don’t touch

the fledglings on the ground. They’ll be left to starve down here. Bats
can hear my eyelids blink—

I cannot remember. What I can say:
that the car slipped off the road, turned over on its side, then over on its roof. The
two,

that other man and John the Colorblind, they flew clear of the car (they were in front)
or stayed

inside,
or dazed, awake, they pulled themselves—they were alive. They were. I can be sure
of that,

but it was him, I can be sure, he was behind them, in the backseat, upside down.
You see, those woods had been so cold. So cold that morning, even, and would be
cold again

eight hours later when I went to sit with friends in the school library before the first
bell. Steve,
mine enemy, he told me Ray had died. I really had felt something strange,
immediately

remembered, waiting

for the late bus—looked at Ray, *he looks so lost*—and how the hallways were like
circuits
gathering a pulse, the news so quick. Dan's friends had stayed with him all night,
helping him

drink,

I know this. See, those woods were filled with water, barely ponds, just run off
from the roads where leaves piled thick made the earth waterproof, a little. And the
woods

were dark with ice that morning and would ice up once again, but just that moment,
almost kindly,

the ice contracted into water, just enough, just so his head would dip beneath it,
almost as if—

he drowned there in that almost ice-cold water, three, four fingers deep, the back-
end would have

been lower,

tilted maybe inches up, just so—he drowned there—just a minute. This, I know.

VALENTINE

I.

Thumbnail moon. The chime of pond frogs and the western wind
succumbed to dark. Under dogwoods, Curtis guns the gas, Daddy
drapes his arm across my shoulders, sweeps me down the back

stairs. I knock my ankle against something metal, hollow, kick
the jamb. The screen door squeaks and swings, slams shut
behind us. West: a hound whines at Tanner's Rink, brown with moss

and covered over with a bale of hay Brittany and Bo will rake
October sometime if that boy comes back. Mr. Tanner
swinging that hose, mock-drunk elephant spraying the crowd

until dark comes on, filling that frame in the hope of cold.
The kids waving at themselves flat there, on the water.

II.

4 X 8 makes 64, I say to Bo. Puppies everywhere, his daddy's money wagging their hundred tongues. Bo laughing as they leap at him. Through the squares of chicken wire the dirty boy

who lives up on the hill sticks out his tongue. It's wet. Bo says, "My daddy says God made you black for being bad, it's in the Bible. Did you know that you got dipped in coal-bins

in the baby-room? Can I touch?" The dark boy grins, "My daddy says your people burn up in the sun, get red because you are undone. That I'm just right." He jerks his shirt up, juts

his belly out: he's outy. Hmph. Bo and me are innies, just like Baby Jesus. But Bo is running his thumb along that tummy, gives it a little punch. "Awwwwwww, you're not dirty, you're

just black. It's all inside your skin like a tattoo, hey Danny, come and see." "I don't want to touch that dirty thing." Well done or otherwise. Bo holding something spotted up against the fence,

the black boy giggling as that little dog lapped at the shadow through the wires. "Bo, you're daddy's gonna haveta shoot that dog, its gonna catch the meezers." Bo is showing him the comic book

he his underneath his shirt. *Uncanny X-Men 1-3-7*. Double issue, I haven't seen it yet. I like the blue guy with the tail, the guy with claws. Daddy says he don't know what they're flying with that

black girl for, she's dumb, she makes it weather, woopdie-doo. Then he burned them. I held my hands against my eyes. Then I made wet.

III.

Bo under the brink, me waiting for his face. He blinks, and laughs, then lurches up, pushes me down by my shoulders. We're twelve, he's pale and thin, before his body filled

with sap, and green his eyes were did was this: the whole of Tanner's land, the sweep of spring, the dusk catching sunlight trying to escape had something of the man in them, and when

he reached to touch my brow, as he watched me looking up, they lit everything. The clothesline where his mother's bathrobe filled up with fat woman made of wind, the cat scratching at the trunk,

the squirrel hissing, clutching upside down, full summer heat. Jimmy watching from the tire swing, dipping his big toe in to test the cold. Nope. Jimmy's dark don't wash. Tanner's land

turns into something public half-way underwater. Me: talking at Bo's neck, him fascinated by the fraying hemp.

IV.

Daddy slamming drawers downstairs. Rattling glasses. Mama scampering and hushing: Chub, Chub, she says, but daddy's mad, won't speak, feet on the staircase so the attic squeaks. Bo and Jimmy at the river. Noon. Bo took the car. Mr. Tanner slapped his naked ass back with bicycle chain. So. The happy couple's caught. Where'd Bo get to? I know where he's not.

V.

One brick to break a house full open. *Don't hurt the girls*. Shadows on TV. Snow. Jackie standing straight up. Pinks of his fingers clawed. The boy, we say, we want the boy. We hear the back screen slam, cricket shriek. The Connecticut creeps its silver bug-dance through the trees. We don't like being fooled by night, but what we've got are lamps, headlights and what's he got: bare bottom fear. We see it bloody up his eyes when we come surrounding him with knowledge: *You ever heard of Sodom, boy?* is what we ask, what part of us will speak. If we were here to scare, we'd keep our mouths shut, be formidable and bright. But we have tools to use, we let the dogs chew at his feet. When we cut Jimmy, Daddy kneels reverently and pulls me down beside him. Brushes a tuft of hair out of my mouth. Moon like brilliant C's in Jimmy's eyes. *Son, the pickled frogs at school won't do when you've got this*. It's beautiful in there. I put my fingertips to Jimmy's heart to feel its beat.

ARGOT

The scythe moon rises red above the fields in frost. The night throbs green, the brick-walls and the bars hum, pulsing with the marching of my heart-beat in my ears. My name: Azubah Thompson, soon will be all that's left of me, chipped onto granite underneath a weeping death's head and a drooping willow. If I am allowed this grace. Hoot paces,

weaving in between the bars, and I call to him to come undo my shackles, but he scorns me, shrieks and giggles, squats obscenely with his rear to me, and toots smoke-rings into the dark of a blue and oily color, then flies through the hoops he has made, and vanishes, squeezing himself between

the rafters to make his escape. They hanged Mortimer Bidwell
for the sin of sodomy, and they stoned Elijah Abbe for his part
in that. The night is giddy with the screeching of myriad bats
searching for my blood to suck, riding on their leathern wings.
If I were what they say, why would I not

rub two sticks together to stir up a bitter wind
to knock those stones asunder, and to lift me to the treetops,
for me to hop from bough to bough and ride triumphantly from town
on the hunched back of a great black crow
whose wings sheen blue in the bright noon sun? We

have had such scarce provisions this winter,
small loaves of bread from winter wheat and rye,
thin butter from Old Tebbie, the spotted cow. Stars
always falling, and the pond smoking with the souls
departed to its depths. I was not strong
beneath the sheriff and the deputy's interrogation,

confessed all manner of blasphemous things
to leave that table and return to this
plain cot, this water bowl, and this freezing sleep, my breath
legion, wraiths escaping from my numb, untruthful lips.
They'll wrap my body in cheap shrouds. Let me
dream these last hours, to sleep—

Arrow—I am fortitude—forsaken by the hook
of reason—took and dragged at half-mast
to be thrown to smoke. Blue bleeds to indigo, blue
not burn but there—there—bare trees
with your writing fingers swat the flames—
two ravens jagged swerve due north—
parting with their third who hurries

toward the river with its wings already
carrying the full moon in their span—
Hoot, will you not speak? Speak! Dawn comes so quickly...
perhaps I'll find myself free
among the rags that they will lower down—perhaps—

But what of it? I am just a hand-sized mule with no use for confession, or poetry.

The surgeon tools the tourniquet with awls,
his thumb presses neatly to its edge. The nail sparks.
Winds his tongue around itself and spits a pit
into the dying fire. The humpback of a ruddy toad
explodes as popcorn would to show the soft, disturbing
porous fungus flesh beneath. He scoops an eye,
rubs the ridges of its brow. His hands

clog-dance on the table slats.
He sees the brute hound falling toward him,

jowl first towards his thumb: he tricks
it, dips down, cuts sideways with the blade.
His head pounds, and he squints—the outline
of the cur untouched. Jabs the pinprick of a dragonfly
along the riverbank of reeds and grass. The river
almost nothing behind the twisted me,

my fingers insubstantial at the mock dog's
jaw. The surgeon holds the leather to candlelight
to watch the shadows of his work spill across the plane
that the cow came to be. He presses his lips
to bring the hemispheres of face together, looks down
at me, cuts the anger from my eyes,
my wide eyes, by severing my throat.

My fingers fall among the sheaves.
A mouse puzzles at the torn nail on my thumb.
I curl into blackbirds, body, thrust up
in the spill of leaves, my fingers wicks, my face
a lantern in which faces play, hand shadows on the kitchen wall—

beneath me, all the mice, shrews
with faces of tattered sponge grow musty in a cistern.
Cats, insects with translucent bodies
creep to watch. In me, the spider's
web folds over the dew bead of the barn.
The hay ignites. The taut mares glitter,
race beneath eyelids opening and closing,
blink blink blink—the hills cry out. The cloud

coughs bloody spit into my hand,
the hungry mouse composes with red footprints. I watch me
from the window, man-face rising from the dough—swamp gas—
as I knead. Little baker scraped from leather!
Demanding things I cannot hear—the thin glass
shakes he is so taken—and I laugh—
put my arms akimbo—rolling pin wagging at my side—and then
defiant, I pinch a bit of flour in my free hand, flick it in his face—
Hag! He sneezes, licks his teeth
with a tongue thick as my ankle. I swing the rolling pin,
land it foursquare on his face,
and roll him flat. *Pert saucebox! Naughty girl.*
His features crawl out from the flour to reply.
Persistent ghoul. His face a pox of black seeds, last winter's rye.

The bread says: *Cuckold, can't you hear her voice
lying to you in your own bed? There is a black- man*

squatting naked, plucking at his dulcimer, drunk on whiskey, atop the coffin shaped like you. But the surgeon laughs.

I tap upon the glass. I had been waiting for my body to be freed. I have my soul in my pouch. Across the table the menagerie is trotting, udders swinging, manes swaying... the toad hops forward, leading them in a wheel-sized circle. My life is an incident, and I a witness on the roadside, silent.

My tongue heavy in my mouth, my jaw a leaf. Whatever I proclaim freezes over the village—
a little smoke from chimneys, a giraffe of ash
nibbling on the thrashing treetops of the storm.
We melt into a lump of wax—

red fruit, lip to lip, our sex
seeping into pillow and rag remnants of my nightdress—
I lean the fiddle by the bellows on the hearth, bend back,
trace my finger along one string. In the fire, a stinking meat
burns sweetly in black cinders from its bone. The rafters and the walls
swept with black: fluttering orange wings.

I curtsey, kneel upon the hearthstones, piss
into the rusted black tureen, rub the ram's horn's segments
as I try to squeeze a salt tear to drop in—
I finish, crouch, spring up on my hinds,
pull the ram's head from my heart to gnaw the rest
of me away. In the fire, salamanders
scuttle the rotten sockets of the skull, leap into the air: their tails

wrap around themselves, pincers, melt and purge—

land before me, one and feline,
grow completely dark; fall inward, to a deep that has no color,
suck in the pewter spoons and knives, the kettle,
flour, onions crackling in their yellow net—
shreds of my body flap into the white cat's eyes, empty scarecrow
into tornado. Pussypuss nods, paws
the ram's hooves, docile, tender, and then speaks:

*I would be lark and squid for you. I would
be boggy dank and hill, I would be worm and blossom—
it is not here, my merriment, my linnet heart,
but in the granary where seeds are moldering
and your sagacity awaits its resurrection into leaves—
for wheel and wick, man-root and maidenhead—*

but then the ram lifts up its mossy hoof and drops it
into what the cat was, quickly crushes—quick grunting under horns,
peevisish thrashing. Its six pound tongue lolls out,

inches through the ashes, jabs the surgeon's
 sagging left socket, tosses the singing bone into the air—
 it falls neatly in my stubbled maw—
 one gulp—down. Spits out the bits like rinds
 into the sizzling pot, boiling, glowering, crimson within the ashes.
 Presses the skull between its forepaws,
 at the ear-holes, lifts it to its rancid, sagging lips, and blows.

Weaver, the threads in spindle worry into cloth. The great wheels
 grind to halt, fly off from the spokes,
 sparks and smoke. A little grit. His thin white fingers combing through the edge
 of it. My words written on the brown eyes of a buck-toothed rabbit
 in its white pelt, like the law. The beaver in the creek fur
 locked in a looking glass. The roan doe bounding down the hillside
 through the new trees ravaged to twig: my fingertips
 brought together, drumming on this blotter. Wick and ink—
 the moon's his goose. The narwhale is the egg it lays.
 Crooked behind his arms, held at the elbows, is the mossy horn.

The night owl blooms to woman, woman
 evaporates to wind. The hunter kneels above the buck, his hands
 stung raw as they enter the red gash. Steam.
 Tears the entrails out in arms of swinging ribbon. Wind silent
 as I watch, angry at blood crystals on grass blades
 as the full moon curves, burns pewter blue, steals
 the highest pitches of the snow, shares
 with night the low stammering of the slowest hues.

The wind becomes the river's bride. I pull

away, tug my shawl about me, bend in half, then half again,
 to squeeze between the red and yellow trees on the riverbank
 into the thickets where the trunks
 growl lewdly for the vapors—undo my garments,
 I step naked—invisible and swift—
 but hesitant, flick the buck's lids back one instant—
 just enough for the eyes to catch the hunter's eyes,
 just opening. He sees the leaping thing. He hears
 the river seep. He sees his dripping fingers
 in the blinking eyes. Its crawling on its paws and hinds.
 Struggling over drowned stones. Finally overtaken.

*The flurry of my hands against his face—
 flat hands, rain pelting, and the sea—
 I am not free. The body I am fever, tic and fit. I am seizure,
 hole and billow. Hurricane I'll climb.
 His fingers lit—suddenly blue, the white glove on my forearm
 and the gray heaving sea below us dark behind it—thunder-crack*

*and petting rain upon my neck—the sudden
pin of chill, the seal spotting on his apron—sir—*

*formality, and his hair drags—
a frozen slap of black across his face—beyond the flurry
of my hand-beats on his fist—his half-fist closing on the dog's throat—
the leather strap limp in the grass,
almost black with rain, the buckle bent—*

*the white bulbs of its eyes peel of their black lids
in the sockets, and the tongue
raw meat between two fangs. Its jaw, limp at his thumb,
hot flesh cupping ivory joints, black-speckled gum—let the land alone, I say,
let go, let go, what have you left to keep you here but me, and I am gone—*

*the soaking furry valves—its earflaps—and the rain,
rain driving nails between the bird stink, the dimple of my chin
chiseled below blue lips—I am cold, cold—please—
the Atlantic down there an edge that we could grind on,
a black wing on the water where a curtain
of a harder raining sweeping toward the breakers—
black chain on the beach below us—
please—*

On the edge of the forest we fix the charts—
scrubbing the vellum with shagreen spindles—the bees,
when squeezed, secrete a potent vapor neither painful

nor narcotic. Pattering. Lizards scampering tail-first
from the bells of lilies bobbing beside the outhouse. Crescent
moon. The absent wood. The surgeon paces in the swallow's gut,
turning and looping his horny thumbnails
through the hemp cords. A box of string,
an hourglass, a doll's hammock, a noose,
his arms the deadweight swinging him from rope.

Crystallizing gas, pecked seeds, fragments of a robin's shell
tumble with him. Thunder boom: twittering inside the great bird's ribcage,
the hundred whistles of it thrumming under feathers—outside, he hears
leaf sliding under leaf and falling down. The cracking of a branch
snapped back by wind, a dragonfly caught in a cat-tail's
plumage, then the cloying mewling of a soaking cat. He is
this tiny dot. I lick my thumb and rub him off.

Morning glories wrapped around the emaciated
hulls of spotted dogs. Bucket in which beans soak,
floating in white scum meniscus. Smoke fragmenting: snowflakes

in the black ice pane, fish rising from the bottom to hang.
*I perfume my cheeks between his cheeks, paint my lips
 by pressing them to the spigot of his backside.*

The thunderhead dilates, an iris
 opening despite its cataract, its crabapple
 eye. Huzzah! Wide eyed girls at prayer marching forward
 on the choppy water, hoarfrost in their hair. Rings
 from the center of the lake, the bedrock underneath shaken.
*When he takes me, I keep from screaming
 by biting on his horns. When he is finished, he stands and pulls my body—
 sash—stamps and raves as I flutter from his shoulder.*

Grosbeaks in a simultaneity of wing, as bees
 at one in movement swooping in a mass into an elm
 disappearing in the branches—birds were branches—
 feathers hardening into bark, flattening to leaf,
 you there in the air, your body coalescing
 out of autumn, smoke, and sparrows,
I am devouring him: nipples, honeysuckle tongue, my sister.
 the late butterflies, the rain—
 your hand, the spores of it, reaching out
 to touch my brow, to drag your finger
 down my nose, my tightened lip, my tongue.

Worm eats outward, probing skin until the soul explodes outward
 and the rags of him flap in the wind—
 the swimming bladder of a boneless ancient shark
 and there—my lovely—fish within the wind—

dog smell on my fingers—a million winds—
 the dizzy paradises of flesh thrown to the tempest then snuffed out—
 I burn. We dip the sheep. My bed smells of the barn.
 His eyes cloud over and his breath a stench of refuse, my billy goat.

Cranberry bog, blood luster. The cry
 of crows, and replying, nothing.

Tarnished shillings scatter at my feet. Kneeling
 in the rye-patch: snouting for toadstools. Pig runt
 waddling to escape the barn
 farts out a baby with the mayor's face, from whose mouth
 a wrist-thick serpent drools and (winding) skates away across the ice.

*Three tests, my love. You visit me in sleep, leave
 a kiss' mark. No human mouth mates mine, but I wake wet,
 seed emptied to the sheets. I moan
 to see your hands burning on the planks, wrists*

*bloodied by hemp. What is it
that makes you burn? A linen wick. I can't hear the wizened prelates.
The sky blackens with your body.
Sleep with me. We will be kindling, winged. We will rise, rise and mock
the face of heaven. Sons wag in their cots like worms. Sheep
drop in the fields while you gather rosemary
by the creek beneath a green, midsummer moon.
I have seen the horned beast lick
your eyelids. I have seen you
scribbling codes in the miller's ledger. I watch*

*from shore: an oily water
laps your ankles. The poachers drop
their taut nets, pheasants scattering,
to cheer. A hare hops free. Your hair
drags the river, dredging mussels,
crawfish, curled hands
of the crushed. The daylight moon
belches crows above your head. Defy him:
dance backward to me on the water—
a scrap, what's left of you, swings from the tree.
I hold my girls against me, prodding them to prayer.
My wife stares through the buckle of her boot.*

Twilight seeps into footprints in the snow, the lake—

flurry of geese over and then the answer, as if waves—wings pull entrance into water

—
fill the open lake with echo, ringing, pulling lengthwise—my body twisting
in its feathers, into tatters dragging from the man
drowning for the nipple dripping wine,
the boiling tit. They strap me

to the plank, and douse my gowns
with lamp-oil. I cry: *Argot, Mother Isis, the milk
boils in your udders and then who will quench me? Hawk,
your father is scattered across my body
with his tormented head between my legs eating—eating—burrowing into the maze—
river drown me—only this—crackling with the water freezing its new skin
on which the stars are falling, and there the anxious flakes flick their tails—scurrying
for me—
I do not burn, but—*

the guard pulls me up by my shackled hands, rips me upwards
to my feet. The dawn shines blue between the bars of the cell's window.
There is a plate of blackened bread, a pewter cup of milk. They have thrown me
in the water and I did not drown, I rose within my sin. My daughters
should be in their beds, but my husband swore against me

and will be waiting at the gallows. The sheriff feeds the toast to me
as the minister reads. Hoot prances across the ceiling like a dappled pony
in show. My silent tears. He turns his pale blue body inside out, and says to me:
I am just a goblin used to play with fools.
I will be half-asleep, then sleep. The morning sky
brightens on the dusty path to crossroads.

GODS

I will start out breaking pits like nutshells,
and drink the dripping milk spilled there:
where is it one can find anything

but numbing quiet here? Even the Old One doesn't know,
being a civilized creator. Wilder spirits
are at work here—in bird explosions from a shaken nest,
sparks reeling into air—there are gods
in everything on an empty rock such as this.

I will die here, who knows when, from lack of youth
or dearth of blood, purer than any modern person
has been. I will forget the atom engine,
the edge of the wheel. My tongue
will have grown lax recalling verbs, pronouns
and adjectives of a superfluous language: I will speak

like bats. I shall drop the rags that cloak me,
run free, browning naked in the sun. I will
eat this life close to my eyes inside my upheld palms:
larvae and sweet berries. I will forget
where I had been, of the baggage I have dropped.
One day, I will lose what mass that I have left:
there will be fierce ghosts in each leaf of grass
growing from my moldering. In silence,

I will shine the purity of light,
in rain, release even that. The polestar,
surrounded by waves scooping out sea,
will snuff the west wind. Only he
will rub the taste of your lips, the musk
of your nuts as I kiss your thighs,
the rough of the scruff of your beard on my belly:
the whisk of your name whispered backwards: I am
leaving, I am leaving.